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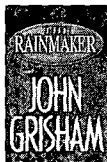
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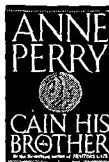
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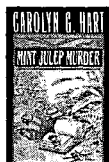
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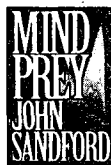
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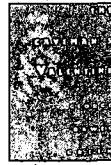
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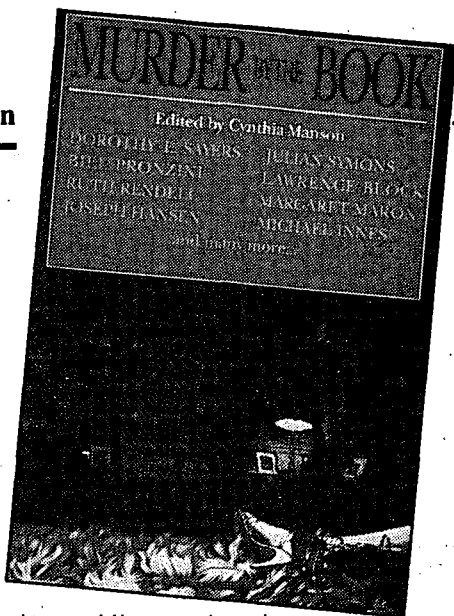
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GUEST EDITORIAL

by Paul G. Reeve

The Naming of "Tecs

Marlowe, Spenser—these are names to stir the blood of mystery readers everywhere, especially aficionados of the hardboiled school. These tough guys, the creations respectively of Raymond Chandler and Robert B. Parker, have brought a literary gloss to a genre of fiction that was often decried as subliterate. Among those doing the decrying, however, the same names are met with enthusiasm—Marlowe and Spenser, two of the leading poets of later sixteenth century English literature, the period C. S. Lewis calls the Golden Age. Could it be more than mere coincidence that these two hard-boiled detectives should have such distinguished namesakes?

Raymond Chandler's biographer, Frank MacShane, has theorized that Philip Marlowe was named after Joseph Conrad's

narrator Marlow in "Heart of Darkness" and other stories (xiii). There is, however, evidence, besides the "e" at the end of his name, that suggests Chandler may have had Christopher Marlowe in mind when he named his detective. It seems that, during a sixteenth century production of Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus* at Bel Savage Inn, the Devil himself put in an appearance. Another such appearance, or apparition, supposedly occurred at a performance of the play at Exeter. By the end of the seventeenth century, this story, certainly apocryphal, came to be attributed to one of the leading actors of the Elizabethan-Jacobean stage.

The actor; so the story goes, was shaken by this experience, thinking he had conjured a real devil. In atonement, he took the savings he had set aside from

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his successful stage career and endowed a college, called The College of God's Gift. This subsequently became Dulwich College, where Raymond Chandler was educated.

And there is more. The actor who founded Dulwich College was Edward Alleyn, whose surname Ngaio Marsh took for her detective Roderick Alleyn. Marsh had a long theatrical career as an actress and director and certainly knew about Edward Alleyn, who was one of the most distinguished actors of his age.

Did Marsh's use of the name Alleyn jog Chandler's memory and inspire him to adopt the name Marlowe for his detective? Telling the story about Alleyn in his biography of Christopher Marlowe, John Bakeless comments that "Alleyn's College of God's Gift still educates British youth in decorous ignorance of the fact that the College really owes its foundation to His Satanic Majesty in person. It is the kind of thing that an educational institution naturally prefers to keep dark" (119). Maybe officially. But it is also the kind of thing that irreverent schoolboys would take delight in and pass down from one generation to the next. Chandler doesn't use the name Marlowe until his first novel, *The Big Sleep* (1939), after the first

appearance of Inspector Alleyn in *A Man Lay Dead* (1934). When his early stories were reprinted in *The Simple Art of Murder* (1950), Chandler changed the names of all the various detectives to Marlowe.

Robert B. Parker chose for his detective the name Spenser because Spenser was another Golden Age poet whose stature was comparable to Marlowe's. Parker is an admirer of Chandler. He completed and published Chandler's last uncompleted manuscript, *Poodle Springs*, and wrote *Perchance to Dream*, a sequel to *The Big Sleep*.

Parker does not give Spenser a first name, but his name can be deduced. The three preeminent poets of the later sixteenth century (leaving Shakespeare, who is in a class by himself, out of consideration) were Christopher Marlowe, Edmund Spenser, and Sir Philip Sidney. Chandler's detective is Philip Marlowe. So if we rearrange the remaining names so that no detective has the same first and last names as a Renaissance poet, Parker's Spenser is Christopher, and there must be a hardboiled detective, whose cases have yet to be chronicled, by the name of Edmund Sidney.

There are many other instances of detectives whose surnames are the same as those of

figures from sixteenth and seventeenth century English literature. Did Margery Allingham have the poet and composer Thomas Campion (1567-1620) in mind when she named her detective Albert Campion? Or the Lockridges—did they think of Sir Thomas North (1535?-1601), whose translation of Plutarch was the source of much of Shakespeare's classical lore, when they created Mr. and Mrs. North? What about "Sapper" (H. C. McNeile)? Had he heard of William Drummond of Hawthornden (1585-1649), the Scottish poet and friend of Ben Jonson, when he wrote about Bulldog Drummond? These suggestions seem to me progressively improbable.

Almost as improbable would be the suggestion that E. C. Bentley was inspired to name his detective Trent after the Council of Trent (1545-63), except for the fact that Bentley dedicated his novel *Trent's Last Case* to G. K. Chesterton. The Council of Trent, of course, laid the foundations of the Catholic Counter-Reformation, and Chesterton was an ardent Catholic apologist.

Chesterton also brought his religion to the detective story in the character of Father Brown, the Catholic priest who is unprepossessing in appearance but who sees so clearly into the

souls of malefactors. Much more impressive in appearance was Chesterton himself. Mystery readers will recognize him immediately: "A mountain in the corner, his bandit's moustache drawn down above several chins, his eyeglasses askew on the broad black ribbon . . ." (Carr 49). John Dickson Carr called him Dr. Gideon Fell but acknowledged that he modeled Dr. Fell after Chesterton. Carr presumably took his detective's name from the well-known rhyme:

*I do not love thee, Dr. Fell,
The reason why I cannot
tell,
But this one thing I know
full well,
I do not love thee, Dr. Fell.*

The quatrain is an imitation of an epigram from Martial:

*Non amo te, Sabidi, nec
possum dicere quare:
hoc tantum possum dicere,
non amo te.*

The Dr. Fell who has replaced Martial's Sabidi was Dr. John Fell (1625-86), the dean of Christ Church, Oxford, and a moving force in the development of the Oxford University Press. The noted epigram was reportedly delivered extempore by Thomas Brown (1663-1704),



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a satirist, not to be confused with the more famous Sir Thomas Browne (1605-82), the author of *Pseudodoxia Epidemica* and *Urn Burial*.

Was Carr having a little joke when he gave his detective the appearance of G. K. Chesterton and the name of a man who had been famously maligned by a satirist with the same name as Chesterton's detective, Brown? Was he perhaps, gently and indirectly, suggesting that Chesterton's reputation as a serious author had been damaged by his dabbling in mystery fiction?

Many distinguished intellectuals have similarly dabbled in mysteries, and many have hidden behind pseudonyms, perhaps to duck the opprobrium of Edmund Wilson and other intellectual snobs who think it a disgrace to care who murdered Roger Ackroyd. Despite the strictures of Wilson and his ilk, however, the detective story has always appealed to the active and inquisitive mind. "The fact is," say Jacques Barzun and Wendell Hertig Taylor, "that from the outset detection has been written for and by high-brows. . . . Historically, the theme of detection has aroused the imagination of writers, from Voltaire, Beaumarchais, Balzac, Cooper, Dumas, and Poe to Dickens, Dostoevsky, Mark Twain, Henry James, Yeats,

Eliot, and C. Day Lewis" (7). With such an audience and such practitioners in the genre, is it any wonder that literary allusions find their way even into the naming of 'tecs?

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NOTE: Paul G. Reeve, author of several stories for AHMM set in Washington D.C. (most recently, "Rule XXII," July 1995), teaches English at the University of Houston. "The Naming of 'Tecs" was originally published in the Spring/Summer 1995 issue of *Clues: A Journal of Detection* 16:1:111-115, by Bowling Green Press, Bowling Green State University, Ohio, and is reprinted with permission.—ED.

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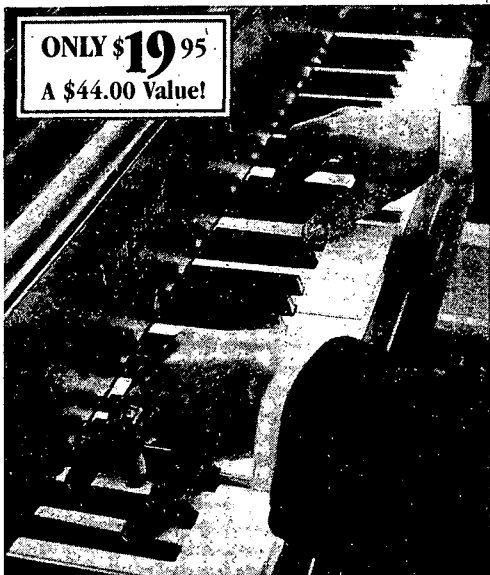
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When my father, Os-good Cartwright, finally wearied of shouting that a sixteen-year-old in this year of 1905 needed an education to advance in the world and my proper place was in a classroom, he grudgingly indicated acceptance of me as partner in his detective agency by buying me a desk. Half the size of his. Parents always manage to have the last word.

Slightly battered, it cost two dollars in a secondhand furniture shop. The proprietor swore it had been used only once a week by a churchwoman when balancing her household accounts.

Wrestling it up to our second floor office on Market Street naturally fell to him. He was more than six feet tall, with broad shoulders and thick arms, a deep chest, and awesome strength. I, on the other hand, took after my dead mother; slight and small for my age. My value to the firm was cerebral, not physical.

The desk received no more use from me than it did from the churchwoman. If not out working on a case, I spent my time in the Free Library down the street reading periodicals and books. After taking in millions of words precisely strung together by those who knew how, I'd absorbed the ability not only to

speak well but to write far better than my contemporaries still in school. Education is not dependent on a teacher at the front of a classroom.

I was at the desk one morning, however, when the door to the office was darkened by the bulk of a middle-aged man. Dressed in quality clothing, he was short, stocky, square-faced, with a full head of black hair and a luxurious black mustache.

"Forgive the intrusion." He swept his bowler at the deserted reception room. "But there is no receptionist—"

There never was. To maintain the fiction that we could afford one, we placed papers about to make it appear as if—

"Miss Heatherstone must have stepped out for a moment," said my father smoothly. (Using whatever name popped into mind.) "How I can be of service?"

The man slid into a chair. "My name is Abner Maxwell. I participate in the import and export business through several storage warehouses I own on the waterfront. A theft has placed me in an awkward position."

He mopped his brow with a white handkerchief.

"The theft occurred last night. All the doors are stoutly barred from the inside. Logic says the watchman must have opened one for the thief. Yet he swears he did not, nor did he notice

anything unusual when making his rounds."

My father smiled skeptically. "Exactly what was stolen?"

Maxwell held his hands approximately two feet apart. "Two boxes of this size, containing cups and saucers from several matched sets of imported porcelain china dinnerware. Let me explain, sir, that such dinnerware is much prized by those who can afford it, but the value lies in more than the beauty, design, and painstaking hand-decoration. The set must be complete. If pieces are missing, the value declines sharply. A discriminating hostess will not purchase mismatched dinnerware for her table. That is another puzzling aspect of the robbery. The thieves took something which can be sold for only a fraction of its true worth—but that's their problem. Mine is that my insurance company will pay only a few cents each for the lost items, as though they were ordinary cups and saucers."

My father smiled. "How unusual."

"The distributor considers the remainder useless and insists on full reimbursement for the entire shipment. Frankly, sir, I cannot afford to make up the difference."

He mopped his brow again. "The police have taken the watchman into custody, hoping

for a confession, but I believe him innocent. I need a far more aggressive investigation and to know how the thieves really gained entry. If it should happen again, I'll face bankruptcy. They suggested I hire a private detective such as yourself. I understand you are quite good at seeking out and handling law-breakers."

I liked to think I was good at the seeking, but there was no question that my father was good at the handling. When Os-good Cartwright stood up and roared, "*Stand fast!*," even the most desperate criminal froze in his tracks.

I was familiar with waterfront warehouses. Driven by a desire to explore every corner of Philadelphia, I'd ventured everywhere, and more than once I'd been very thankful I was fleet of foot. Certain neighborhoods did not welcome a stranger, particularly a young one. The shouts of my pursuers might be in a foreign language, but I needed no translator to tell me my fate if I was caught.

"Mr. Maxwell," I asked, "your warehouse has skylights?"

Maxwell's belligerent expression said he hadn't come here to be questioned by a boy.

"My son is my partner," said my father.

Maxwell shrugged as if nothing should be a surprise when

dealing with private detectives. "Yes, but the skylight wells are barred by sturdy wire mesh. If one was removed or damaged, it would be apparent immediately."

"As a businessman, you have subscribed to the phone system?"

"Of course." He indicated the telephone on my father's desk. "One has no choice."

"Please, sir, indulge me. Call and have someone you trust climb a ladder and examine those skylights closely."

He looked at my father, who wordlessly pushed the telephone toward him.

Maxwell was one of those who hadn't yet learned that yelling into the telephone served no purpose, and his words echoed out of the office and down the hall. With a bit more volume, they wouldn't have required Mr. Bell's assistance to cross the city.

He mopped his brow again when he hung up. "Talking into an instrument still makes me nervous. How a wire can transmit my words is beyond me."

He and my father spoke as we waited for the return call while I glanced impatiently at the clock on the wall.

When the call finally came, he favored me with a look tinged with awe. "The wire mesh on one of the skylights has been cut

and reattached so as to be unnoticeable from the floor. How could you possibly know?"

"A good detective must think like a thief," I said. "If I wished to rob your warehouse, that's what I would have done."

"Well then, sir," he said to my father, "your youthful partner has solved one problem very handily. If you can solve the other, you will make me a happy man. Allow me to pay you for your time this morning."

"No need," I said airily. "A coin for the call will be sufficient. We'll render a bill when we find your property."

My father glared at me after he'd gone.

"That was no way to conduct business. Even though you already had the solution, we could have made a great show of examining the premises and thereby charged a handsome fee, but from your impatient glances at the clock, I assume you have other plans for the afternoon. Speak up, young man."

I'd been devious with my father on occasion and survived his wrath, but with lost dollars dancing before his eyes, this wasn't a good time to equivocate.

"Wild Willie and I . . ."

"Ah. Your baseball-throwing friend who dreams of becoming a professional because he can throw the ball through a brick

wall. Unfortunately, it's never the one he's aiming at. He also has not mastered the curve. What mischief had you planned?"

"Pittinger of the Phillies is pitching against the Giants' Christy Mathewson this afternoon at Baker Bowl."

His anger vanished. "Pittinger against Mathewson? I doubt the match will halt the Giants' march to the title, but it should be a good contest." He pushed his chair back. "Let's find Wild Willie and be on our way. We can look for Maxwell's cups and saucers tomorrow."

In the morning, however, a large basket of New Jersey produce and Southern fruits was delivered to the office at the moment Maxwell himself phoned. Looking for how the thieves had gained access to his roof, he'd entered the vacant building adjoining his, the key to which he'd been safeguarding as a service for the real estate agent. The boxes were on the second floor, broken open, but nothing was missing.

Since we'd now also lost the fee for recovering the merchandise, Maxwell's call generated a long parental lecture on how much more I'd cost the firm by inveigling him into attending a ballgame rather than paying attention to business.

I absorbed little of it. I was trying to visualize a sane thief who would abandon loot for which he worked so hard.

The fruits and vegetables we passed along to Miss Hastings, employed by a lawyer down the hall. She took care of what few secretarial tasks we required, sub rosa as it were, when her boss was busy in court.

At breakfast the next day in the small restaurant several doors from our office, my father was scanning his early edition of the *Record* when he murmured softly, "Good heavens. Mr. Maxwell has gotten himself murdered."

I thoughtfully stirred the mushy oatmeal he insisted was essential to the growth and well-being of anyone below the age of eighteen. I would get something tastier later.

"I'm sorry to hear that. What were the circumstances?"

He reread the story. "Last evening, he was alone in his office in the warehouse. While on his rounds, the watchman heard the report of a pistol and found him dead. The gunman had fled."

"Strange," I said. "First the robbery—"

"Probably a coincidence. I need not remind you that at night the dock area has always been an ideal setting for all types of skulduggery."

He rattled the paper. "However, the police do suggest the robberies may be connected in that Maxwell sent for them. A form of waterfront blackmail, lad. Don't complain about a little thievery or we'll burn down your warehouse or kill you. Many on the docks accept it as a necessary business expense."

"A gang wouldn't settle for lifting two boxes out of a skylight, Father. It would have overpowered the watchman, opened a door, and loaded a wagon with choice merchandise. And common thieves would have peddled the loot door-to-door for whatever they could get, not abandoned it in a vacant building."

He folded the paper neatly, as though closing the subject. "Perhaps, but no matter who's involved, it's out of our hands. And just as well. For us, the name Maxwell doesn't seem capable of producing any revenue."

He was wrong. Several hours later, a woman dressed in black entered the office and introduced herself as Mrs. Maxwell.

Much younger than he, tall and slim, with glossy black hair, she had a firm, determined chin and remarkably light hazel eyes. Altogether one of the most striking women I had ever seen despite the very visible signs of her grief.

After accepting our condo-

lences, her voice breaking from unshed tears, she said her husband had spoken so highly of us that she wished us to find his murderer. The police, she felt, lacked the imagination and initiative.

When my father pointed out that their investigation had only begun, she said they suggested Maxwell might have been killed by a gang as a warning to others for reporting a robbery, but she considered it far more likely that one of his enemies was responsible.

She suspected three in particular.

One was his former partner, Gordon Kimball. During the recent depression, Kimball had panicked and wanted to close down. Maxwell had bought him out at great personal sacrifice. When the economy stirred, Maxwell astutely acquired several other vacant warehouses at low prices, so he'd been well on his way to becoming wealthy.

Envious of his acumen and jealous of his success, Kimball now spoke bitterly of being forced out. He vowed revenge and was considered a mean and vindictive man capable of anything.

The second was Jacob, Maxwell's son by his first marriage. (That explained the age difference.) He'd never forgiven his father for remarrying after his

mother died, and accused the present Mrs. Maxwell of marrying him for his money even though the man she'd been engaged to when she met Maxwell had been far wealthier. In spite of this bitter relationship, Jacob was second only to his father at the firm and would now benefit along with Mrs. Maxwell.

The third was the man she'd been engaged to, Adam Richter. Richter owned a bank and several lucrative waterfront businesses. Maxwell had met her in his office, and as the saying goes, they'd been smitten with each other. She'd broken off her engagement and married Maxwell. That had been more than a year ago, and Richter had yet to accept his loss. She'd heard he'd sworn an undying enmity toward Maxwell.

She'd spoken to the police about these men. They'd assured her they'd investigate them.

My father appeared troubled. "Frankly, madam, I don't see why you need us. The police are methodical but efficient."

"And when immediate results are not obtained, the crime is pushed into the background by others. No, thank you, Mr. Cartwright. I need someone to concentrate on the matter and do whatever must be done." Her voice trembled. "Unless I fulfill this final obligation to my hus-

band, I can never sleep soundly."

My father smiled suddenly. "In that case, we will do our best."

I noted that for a man so ready with lectures on how to conduct business there was no discussion of a fee, but then as my mother had often said, "A pretty woman need only flutter her eyelashes for him to gallop to her rescue."

Like father, like son. Different sizes, perhaps, but with the same tendencies of the heart. I'd already donned my armor, mounted my white charger, and drawn my sword.

Staring at the door after she'd gone, I heard him call Sergeant Cletus Galway. Galway was short, barrel-shaped, and bull-necked, with a flat, broad face. He and my father shared an affinity for drinking beer and chasing criminals and attractive women. (The latter supposedly without my knowledge.)

Muttering, "Ah . . . I see . . . Really . . . Understood . . . Of course . . .," he paced the office, the long black telephone in one hand, the receiver clamped to his ear by the other.

He hung up, frowning. "Cletus says Maxwell was shot in the head with a small-caliber pocket pistol, like a derringer, while seated at his desk. He therefore concluded that Max-

well knew his assailant and so took the widow's accusations seriously enough to look into the whereabouts of the three men. All were witnessed elsewhere. What comment do you have to that?"

"Men of their stature seldom hazard their freedom by shooting someone, except perhaps in a fit of rage."

"So then. Where are we?"

I thrust my hands in my pockets and looked out the window on Market Street. Only a few years ago, all conveyances had been horse-drawn. Now the streetcars were powered by electricity and automobiles could be spotted here and there, and it seemed to me that it wouldn't be too long before those noble beasts vanished completely from city streets. And I recalled reading that no matter how the world changed, the characters of the people remained constant, ranging from saintly to evil with all the permutations between.

"There's something strange about that robbery, Father. Picture a warehouse with boxes, crates, bags of commodities piled high and separated by aisles. Almost anything seized would be worth more than what they took, yet—"

"Ah. They made off with something in particular, in the dark, in the short time between a watchman's rounds. They there-

fore knew exactly where it was. So there must be an inside man."

"Another question persists. Why would the boxes be opened but the contents left intact unless they were after something else packed within? I can only speculate, but the shipment came from the Orient—"

He was silent for a moment.

"You are implying—"

"Smuggling."

In any port, there is always benign smuggling as he called it—odds and ends, little packages carried ashore or aboard by the seamen. And there would always be far grander efforts that netted huge rewards but earned a jail term if discovered by the customs service.

He grunted. "That mind of yours frightens me. Sometimes I almost wish it was like Wild Willie's, filled with nothing but baseball. I recall Maxwell saying he was teetering on the edge of bankruptcy, so there's no question he needed money. Let me look into his business affairs. I may discover something of interest."

"And I will visit the warehouse and casually talk to one of the workmen. Questioned directly, they would plead ignorance, but words sometimes slip out when they see no threat."

He frowned. "I object to that as being too dangerous."

"Don't worry, Father. My feet won't allow me to be stuffed into a crate and shipped to South America. At any sign of danger, they have a mind of their own."

While an adult could go anywhere in the city with little challenge, someone my age had to appear to belong to the social stratum wherein he ventured. Being well-dressed in a poor neighborhood was an invitation to violence and abuse, while being too poorly dressed in a finer one brought contempt, not cooperation.

I'd also learned the value of speech appropriate to the neighborhood. I could spout a little Italian, Yiddish, and German and fake an Irish brogue and was working on a bit of Polish. In one of the wealthy neighborhoods I could talk down my nose as well as anyone.

From the wardrobe I kept in the office, I selected a shirt and baggy pants I could have inherited from a larger, older brother, then dirtied my hands and face and scuffed dust onto my boots as I headed for Maxwell's warehouse.

A short distance south of the Camden ferries, the building was on Delaware Avenue, a wide, cobblestone street lined on one side with numbered piers, on the other with business

places connected with the shipping trades. The railroad ran down one side to allow freight cars to be loaded and unloaded almost directly opposite the docked ships. Locomotives, drays, wagons, snorting horses, and hand carts competed for space. The din was such that one had to be constantly on alert or suffer bodily injury.

I studied it from across the street, my view broken by constantly passing traffic, which also kept me from being noticed. Fronted by a waist-high concrete delivery dock protected by a slanted, corrugated roof, it was attached to a row of three story red brick office buildings; each corniced, with deep-arched barred windows and sandstone steps leading to a stout front door. The warehouse roof could easily be reached from the one adjoining, which carried a *For Sale* sign.

A narrow alleyway at the other end of the warehouse allowed access to the rear, where a projecting sign read "Office."

On a spur, two railroad cars were being unloaded, along with several drays. Through three wide doors leading to the cavernous interior, men entered and emerged like busy ants—wheeling hand trucks or carts or toting sacks on their shoulders. I found it difficult to reconcile so much activity with a

business supposedly on the verge of bankruptcy.

I wandered down the alley past the office to the rear and another narrow alley. The back of the warehouse contained only one door, which looked as though it hadn't been opened since the War Between the States, while the office buildings were protected by a ten foot fence.

Returning to the front, I clambered up onto the dock. The busy men ignored me. I watched one who was shorter than my father but with shoulders equally as broad; hair and mustache black, full, and curling. Sweat staining his grimed collarless shirt and trickling from beneath his cap, he wrestled a heavy wood crate from the body of a dray onto his hand truck, wheeled it to the platform, and paused for breath.

"Buon giorno," I said.

He chuckled. "Come off it, bucko. With that phiz, you ain't no more Eyetie than me, and if Carnahan catches you on this platform, you'll be feelin' his boot on your backside. Now, I'm thinkin' you hold your head too high to be a thief, so what are you doin' up here?"

"I thought to apply to the office for work," I said, "but before doing so, I wanted to see how the men were treated. How do you find it here?"

He mopped the back of his neck with a red bandanna. "Holy Mother, the nerve of the lad. As if jobs were so plentiful he can pick and choose while they wait breathless in the office for His Honor t'make application. 'Tis not the way of it, m'boy. I'd rather be drawin' beer for patrons in a nice cool bar, I would, but like everyone else I must take what I can get."

He glanced up the platform. "A word of advice, lad. Not only are thieves feared here, but strange eyes. They may see somethin' not meant for them to see—"

"Delahanty!"

A man with dirty, stringy brown hair combed over a balding pate and supporting a clipboard on his potbelly was hurrying toward us, his face contorted with fury.

"Off with you," muttered Delahanty, "else Carnahan will beat you and fire me. Go!"

I leaped from the platform, ran a few steps, and turned back to see Carnahan shouting. Not quite cowed, Delahanty resumed his labors.

Carnahan came to the edge of the platform and shook his fist. "If I lay hands on you, you misbegotten whelp, I'll kick you the length of the city!"

I was tempted to yell, "With that beer belly in your way, you couldn't kick a horse turd in the

roadway!" but wisely kept my mouth shut.

As I thought. Workers like Delahanty had a way of sensing something amiss, but since I knew little about smuggling, I'd talk to someone who did.

Some time ago, I'd run into a tall young customs inspector named Reyburn. Ten years older than I, he had been with Admiral Dewey at the battle of Manila Bay. Naval term of service fulfilled, he'd joined the customs service. If I'd had an older brother, I'd have wished for one like Reyburn.

I found him at his desk in the Customs House. Grinning and pounding me on the back, he took in my ragamuffin attire and asked what I was up to. I explained.

He thought for several moments before telling me that no suspicion had ever been connected with Maxwell and the distributor for whom the porcelain dinnerware was destined, unlike some other firms the service kept its eye on, but if they had been involved, it might be in this manner.

The plot required someone abroad to acquire the contraband and conceal it in a shipment. A confederate would remove it when the shipment arrived at Maxwell's, which was

not as simple as it sounded. No distributor would accept a shipment which had been opened by anyone except the customs service and so certified. He felt the robbery had been simulated to justify that opening. As to what contraband might be small enough to be concealed with the cups and saucers, he guessed something like gems.

And then he leaned forward and smiled. "There is one more person we must consider here, young Cartwright. A financier. Such an enterprise requires an outlay for purchase and bribery. Almost always a man with money is behind these situations. In his financial position, Maxwell could be only a participant, if indeed he was involved at all. He may not have been. He may somehow have learned what was going on, and was murdered before he could defend his good name."

We agreed he'd make inquiries while we continued with ours and see what developed.

Returning to our office, I apprised my father of what I'd learned.

He in turn had discovered that Maxwell's wealth, like that of many others, existed on paper. He'd overextended himself at the first sign of economic recovery, a gamble that could reward him handsomely or send

him to the poorhouse. Surprisingly, the debt was held by Adam Richter's bank, but my father pointed out that a banker would lend money to the Devil himself if he could negotiate beneficial terms.

We agreed that a man in Maxwell's position might well turn to an illegal enterprise to save himself, but our impression of the man was that if he went down he'd go down honestly. If so, who then was in a position to use the warehouse facilities freely and had access to the key to the building next door?

One man. Jacob, his son, who could come and go as he pleased without question.

"But Jacob couldn't have killed his father," I pointed out.

"No, but a confederate could, and Jacob wouldn't dare tell the police because it would put him in jeopardy not only from the confederate but also as an accessory under the law."

I thought of Carnahan, the foreman. A good candidate, possessing a ruthlessness which made that speculation ring true.

It was my father, ever concerned with money, who brought us back to the unknown financier Reyburn had felt necessary.

"No doubt his tracks will be well covered," he said. "His type can be brought down only

through the testimony of an accomplice."

My mind returned to the beehive of the warehouse, picturing workmen like Delahanty wheeling crates and boxes in and out. It would be customary to alert the warehouse to the arrival of the shipment, but someone had to be able to spot which boxes contained the contraband and see that they were placed beneath a skylight. And a thief, dropping down in the dark with possibly only a small lantern to aid him, had to be certain he selected the right ones.

We called Galway and asked if the shipment was still at hand.

"Impounded until our investigation is complete," he said. "I can reexamine the boxes, but even if I find something, how can I prove who knew to look for it?"

"Perhaps he will serve himself up on a porcelain china dinner plate," I said.

He appeared in our office an hour or so later.

"With apologies, Osgood, I sometimes think your son should be locked away as a national treasure."

My father grinned. "There are times when I think he should be locked away, Cletus, but not as a national treasure. What did you find?"

Galway flipped his notebook open to a rough drawing of a

starburst within a circle. "This was on the stolen boxes but on no others in the shipment. Its purpose is clear, but how can I prove who knew what it meant? Anyone questioned will deny it, and even if I sense one is lying, there's nothing I can do."

They looked at me.

"I have a plan," I said.

My father wagged a forefinger at me and shook his head. "No," he said.

Typical of a parent. With no idea of what I had in mind, he already expressed disapproval.

Late that afternoon I entered the warehouse office wearing a white shirt, striped tie, and blue jacket with the emblem of one of the private schools in the city.

I politely displayed a copy I'd made of the symbol Galway had found on the boxes to a slight, spectacled, eyeshaded, middle-aged man seated at a desk.

"The language and markings on foreign imports intrigue me, as stamps do others. My teacher suggested I explain them to my class, thereby enhancing everyone's knowledge. This one mystifies me. I call it the Oriental Star. Since I noted it on a box at your warehouse several days ago—" I hesitated. "Perhaps I am imposing—"

Adults almost always favor a polite youth in the interest of education.

He smiled. "My position does not call for such knowledge." He disappeared into an office enclosed in frosted glass and reappeared a moment later. "Mr. Maxwell will see you."

Jacob Maxwell was the physical image of his father.

"I can give you only a few minutes, young man. Hobbs says you have a question. What would you like to know?"

I showed him the copy and repeated my fabricated story. He greeted both with what my father called a poker face.

"Possibly it's the mark of the shipping firm, but it's not familiar to me."

"Thank you, sir. I'll just go to customs. I understand the service has a record of all such marks."

The threat also produced no reaction. "It does, but let's ask my foreman first. He has a greater knowledge of these details than I."

Hobbs was at the door of the outer office. "As arranged, Mr. Maxwell, I'm leaving a bit early. You'd better lock up after me."

My stomach turned over. Being locked in a warehouse at the mercy of my suspects was definitely not part of my plan. For a moment I considered leaving with Hobbs, but if I did, nothing would have been accomplished and the criminals would have been alerted. I foolishly decided

to take the risk and depend on my wits, come what may. Un-easily, I watched Jacob bolt the door top and bottom, and meekly followed him into the silent and deserted warehouse like a lamb to slaughter.

"Carnahan!"

The potbellied foreman appeared around a stack of boxes.

"This young man wishes to know the significance of a shipping symbol." Maxwell motioned to me.

I held up the drawing.

Carnahan looked from the drawing to me. His eyes narrowed. "Good thing you brought him to me, sir. He's the whelp who was snooping. He was here yesterday, eyeing what was being trucked into the warehouse, but he was dressed much more poorly."

Maxwell's fingers clamped cruelly on my shoulder.

"Snooping?"

I was definitely in trouble. My mind galloped. "My name is Cartwright—"

The fingers tightened. "The young detective my father—"

"The same." I threw caution to the wind. "We have determined that people here were engaged in smuggling. One of them killed your father when he was discovered."

Carnahan retreated several steps, his hand thrust into his pocket, his voice menacing.

"Nonsense, boy. Mr. Maxwell was killed by a gang."

Maxwell's hand tightened more. "You have names, boy?"

With a sudden twist, I broke away and faced them both, arrogantly thinking I could cow them with words. "It was Carnahan and . . ."

The sudden appearance of a derringer in Carnahan's hand struck me speechless.

"Stupid lad," he said calmly. "Your interference has killed you both."

Both? *Both*? Were we wrong about Jacob?

My dry lips could only whisper. "Be warned. My father and the police are outside."

He grinned evilly as he leveled the pistol at me. "I'll not hang any higher for three than for one, and will have the satisfaction of seeing you dead."

Jacob stepped in front of me. "You abused my father's trust and then killed him, Carnahan? Why?"

"For money. What else? You are a bigger fool than he. It took him only a day to puzzle out what was going on, but he was too stupid to call the police immediately."

"And what was going on, Carnahan?" Jacob said quietly.

"It will do no harm to tell you now. A beautiful plan, it was. First we benefit from the smuggling, then we acquire the ware-

houses because he couldn't meet his obligations. As we will surely acquire them now with you dead."

Jacob cursed and lunged as Carnahan fired.

My feet betrayed me. Instead of taking me into the dim recesses of the cavernous warehouse where I might elude Carnahan and his gun, they took me toward the door, where I had no chance to escape before a bullet reached my back.

I skidded to a halt at the office when I spotted a heavy glass inkwell on Hobbs's desk. I scooped it up, spun, and hurled it in desperation as Carnahan charged through the doorway.

Trailing a plume of ink the way some claimed Mathewson's fastball trailed smoke, it felled him as sharply as any bean ball had ever dropped an unwary batsman.

Jacob suffered a very serious chest wound. Without immediate medical attention, he'd have died, so when he saved my life, he'd made it possible for me to save his. His survival also assured two witnesses to Carnahan's confession.

With Jacob cleared, Galway soon found Carnahan's actual confederate, a weasel-like ex-sailor adept at climbing ropes. He willingly became the third

witness against the murderous foreman.

Facing certain conviction and a death sentence, Carnahan had no qualms in naming the mysterious "we" who'd been his partner.

As we all expected, particularly after Galway ascertained that Carnahan had once worked for him, the mastermind of the plot was Adam Richter. He wished not only to enrich himself by foreclosing on Maxwell, but to destroy him for taking away his fiancée. It was Carnahan's word against his, however, until Reyburn, using the resources of the customs service, located the gems and the shady jeweler who had purchased them. His identification of the man who had sold him a half-dozen uncut Burmese rubies was very convincing to the jury.

Only the overseas conspirator who had purchased the gems and concealed them in the boxes escaped punishment, since he was a foreign national and not subject to our laws.

The shining light of the whole sordid episode was the lovely Mrs. Maxwell. Although warehousing was considered no fit occupation for a genteel woman, she went among those rough and ready men and successfully ran the business during Jacob's recuperation, aided by Del-

ahanty, whom I suggested as foreman. She continued after Jacob recovered. Even he respected her managerial skills and shrewdness of judgment.

Her husband would have been proud of her, particularly when, at the conclusion of the trial, she marched up to Richter and, to the delight of the reporters present, slapped him so hard she knocked him from his feet. I suspected she'd wanted to do that even while she was engaged to him, but the reason would remain secret.

When I caused Reyburn to look for gems, he had no idea he'd find such a priceless one.

Smitten like Maxwell, he immediately embarked on an intense courtship.

The lecture I'd anticipated on my stupidity in being trapped in the warehouse and almost getting Jacob and myself killed never materialized. Instead, my father framed Cletus's drawing of the Oriental Star and put it on the wall opposite my desk.

It hung there like a malevolent eye, glaring at me every time I lifted my head; reminding me that if I insisted on playing a game with men, I had better act like a responsible one.

The most effective parental rebukes are often wordless.

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FICTION

Murder Is My Specialty

James N.
Frey

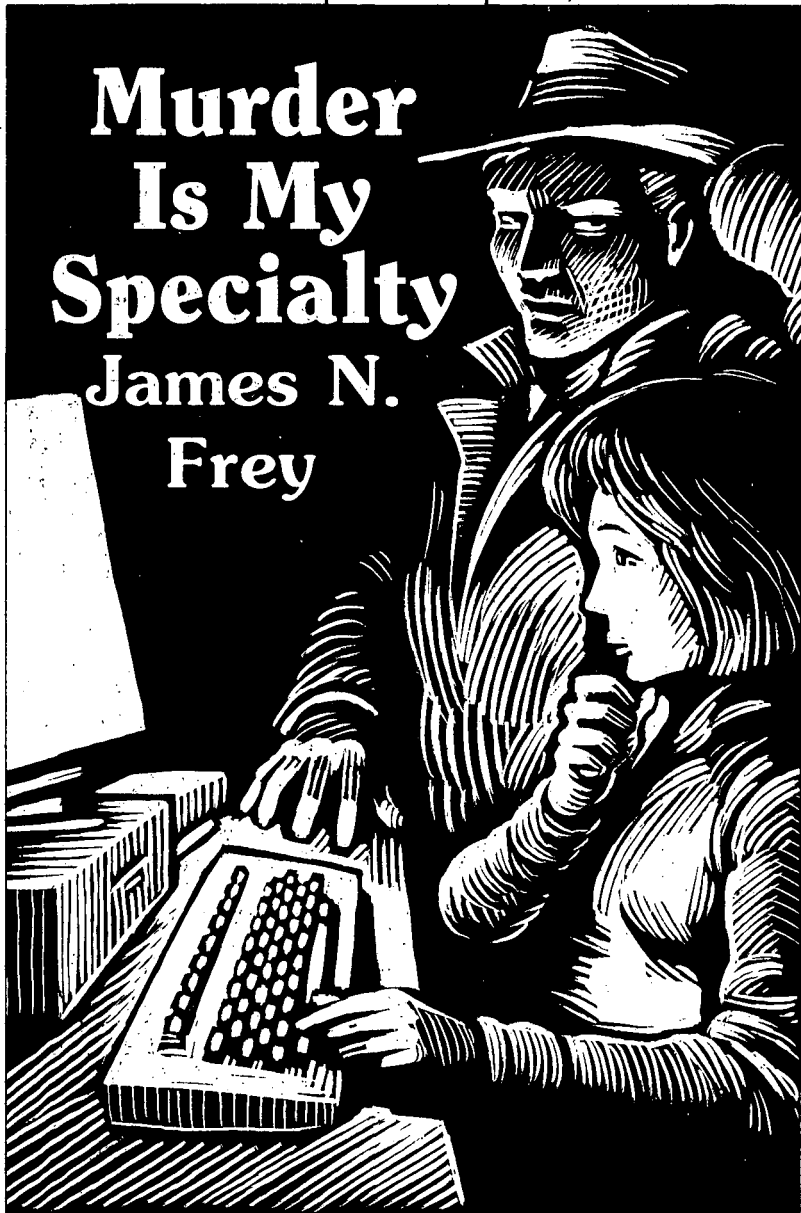


Illustration by Tim Foley

Alfred Hitchcock Mystery Magazine 2/96

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The truth of it, being a dick ain't a breeze like that Magnum guy on TV makes it look, catch? Him living in this mansion on the beach and driving a red Ferrari and all that crappola. Me, I live in my nine by twelve office with a worn rug and pasty walls still showing cracks from the '06 quake. You want to be a dick, you got to sacrifice, catch? And you got to be creative. A dink like Magnum living fat, he don't make it two days in the business for real.

Take the Robards case. That one took all the creativity I could create, catch?

It begins when this Tracy Robards dink calls me on the horn on a Saturday morning. I'm laying on my army cot, which is crammed between my desk and the window overlooking Third and Market in downtown San Francisco. I'm nursing a stinger hangover, watching a Magnum rerun on my nice black and white. I grab the horn on the second ring and announce they got Smigelski Investigation, Joe Smigelski himself speaking. There's been a murder, a female voice on the other end of the line squawks. So call the police, I says. She tells me she already called the police and a hundred other private eyes, but they all think she's cuckoo. I asks her if she can handle a five hundred dollar retainer, cash, and she says no problem, so I tell her it's her lucky day, murder is my specialty.

I get her address, and I head on out there as soon as I see how Magnum bags the perp. That's P.I. talk for perpetrator. You want to be a dick, that's the way you got to talk.

Anyway, this Tracy Robards dink lives in a flashy condo out on Forty-seventh Avenue by the beach. She comes to the door dressed like a business type, gray skirt, gray sweater, little gold necklace. A real neat dresser. She's maybe thirty-five, with a plain face, auburn hair combed straight down the sides, bangs in front. No ugh-o, but no raving beauty either. Her eyes are puffy and pink from doing a lot of crying. She has a firm handshake and invites me into the living room, which is full of brass and plants, real modernlike, smelling of leather cleaner. Floors as shiny as an ice rink.

Me she gives a long lookover, and I guess she thinks maybe my shoes are too scuffed and my old brown suit's a little wrinkled, but hey, she hired a dick, not a dink to pose for a cover of *Gentleman's Quarterly*. So where's the corpse, I says. She doesn't know, she says. So who's the victim, I says, and she says she thinks his name is Sam, but she isn't too sure of that, and she thinks he lives in North Beach, but she's really not too sure of that either. Mysteries, it

seems, are bouncing around the living room like somebody dumped a bag of ping-pong balls.

So I asks her if she's sure there's been a murder. Yes, she says. Of that she's certain. She says I should follow her, which I do, and we go up these thick-carpeted stairs to a bedroom and inside there's this huge computer and printer, all that modern dink stuff. Click, click, she flashes some stuff on this huge blue screen. There, she says, showing me this thing that looks like a poem, and it's full of all this crap about sunsets and sunrises and how the universe has stood still since meeting fair Tracy. I near puke.

So what's this, I asks.

This, she says, is the kind of thing Sam the Lionhearted had been sending her by e-mail. E which, I says? She explains that it's like writing letters on the computer, and so I says yeah and so what, so where's the stiff? She shows me this other letter and it's signed by a guy named Abner Doubleday, and it says that an emergency came up and Sam the Lionhearted had to leave the country and was never coming back.

A single tear, about the size of a grape, rolls down the dink's face. She says she was desperately in love with him and now that he's been murdered she wants the guilty party put away for life—but not executed, she's against the death penalty. Dead against it.

Okay, I says, so the guy had to leave the country, so let me ask again, where's the body? Then she says she doesn't know, but for sure he was murdered because he'd never leave her, them two being so much in love. So I says okay, good, let me have a description of Sam the Lionhearted, and this is when the dink lays on me that even though they've been sending this gooey love poetry to each other for two years over the computer they have never actually met like two flesh and blood lovers usually do, at least in circles I been traveling in.

Which proves, I think, that no matter how long you're in this business, a dink can surprise you.

If he wasn't dead, he could access the Net anywhere. Sob, sob. The net? I says. That's right, the Net—the Internet—the information superhighway, she says, which I remember vaguely from some election campaign but thought it was part of the interstate system and so I voted for the guy because I like freeways. Sam could, she says, send her e-mail at her e-mail address, TracyR@Telenet.com. And I says oh yeah, sure. So I ask her for the five hundred retainer and she says sure, and she gets her purse and counts out five slam, and

I say if there's a corpse, I'll smell it out. She says I should maybe start with his e-mail address, which, she says, is Lionhearted @World.On.Line.com. I tell her I'll be in touch. She says that World On-Line will not give out any information on their members, absolutely, and hacking your way in just wouldn't be possible.

It's best not to let on you don't have no idea what the hell a dink client's talking about, so I tell her that for Joe Smigelski the impossible is as easy as making a peanut butter and jelly sandwich.

From this Robards dink's place I go to my sister's apartment in Oakland. She's got a smart-ass twelve-year-old kid named Edgar, The King of the Hackers as he calls himself, who for a slam goes bingo-bango with his Macintosh computer and spits me out a name: Samuel Lionel Molner and an address in The City (which is what San Franciscans call San Francisco and never Frisco) over on Filbert. I says to the kid I think he's stiffing me, a hundred bucks for what don't take ten minutes. The smart-ass says I'm lucky I'm his uncle, otherwise he wouldn't waste his time, that he gets ten times that from the FBI.

So I have some supper at this Mexican joint called The Bean and Me that has a hot sauce that the City of Oakland requires be served with a fire extinguisher. I have the Supremo Grande dinner. Then I head back to the city. I find the address on Filbert and go directly to the manager's apartment. Turns out he's a bald cretin, maybe fifty, chomping on a cigar, wants a half a slam to talk and we negotiate down to a quarter slam. I ask him about this Molner dink, and he says he's never seen him, that he sticks to his room and ain't been out in the daylight since he lived there, but sometimes, late at night, he hears his car going out. So how's he make a living, I ask, and he says he's maybe a vampire. Chuckle, chuckle. I says I heard he may be a murder victim, and the cretin just laughs and says I watch too much TV. I ask him if he knows this Abner Doubleday, and he says sure, he invented baseball. Now we're getting someplace, I says, catch?

Funny, but every time I go over to Oakland and visit Edgar, I get a lot of gas. I pop a few Roloids and go up to Apartment 3 and knock on the door. Nobody answers, so I bang my fist and yell that I'm the cockroach inspector and if he don't open up I'll have the cops on his ass for harboring cockroaches. This is what it means to be creative.

The door opens a crack on a thick chain, and a sleepy voice says like he don't got no cockroaches and where's my I.D.? It's dark inside. I ask him if he's Molner, and he says who's asking. So I asks

him about this Doubleday dink, and he shouts that Sam the Lionhearted is gone forever and she should forget him.

And he slams the door in my face, and the truth of it is, I don't know from Montana what the hell's going on. So I figure to hang around and see what the dink does next, now that I've stirred up the soup a little, catch?

So here I am, it's three in the morning and I'm across the street sitting in my cosy old VW bus, sipping coffee and munching chocolate doughnuts—the dick's diet, one of the best things about being a dick—when I sees a Toyota coming out of the dink's garage and so I tail him without turning my headlights on which is dangerous as hell, but us dicks, we feed on danger. I follow the Toyota out Bay Street all the way to the end, where he turns and goes over to Geary and out Geary to Land's End, where he goes up over a curb and gets on this sort of path leading down to the cliff above the ocean.

Here I follow on foot, taking with me this flashlight cost me twenty-five ninety-five at Radio Shack and is about a million candlepower. The sea is pounding away, it's windy and cold and foggy and smells of dead fish. I find the Toyota with the trunk open and hear some grunting, and I head down toward the cliff and I see this guy lugging this huge chest. The dink's getting rid of the stiff, I figure. I get all excited thinking I'm gonna get my mug on TV, drum up a little business, which has in fact been a little stinko of late.

He drags the trunk over some rocks to the edge of the cliff, and I know if he gives it a push it's goodbye, Charley. I hit the light and yell freeze, and the dink, he jumps about four feet in the air with his hands up. Don't shoot! he screams.

That's when I see the dink's wearing a ski mask, real mysterious.

I tell him to open the trunk. He fumbles with the lock and opens it, then stands back for me to see.

I shine the light inside. No corpse, catch? It's full of computer stuff. I put the light back on the perp. He's still got his hands up.

So what's this, I says. Illegal dumping, he says, and I got him dead to rights and he wants to confess and hope they lock him up and throw away the key and nobody ever hears from him again. Then he says how he had to get this damn computer and modem out of his life, how if he had it around, it would mock him. Mock his life.

What the hell is he talking about, I ask. Tracy, he says. He fell in love with her, he says, his voice squeaking when he says her name. I tell him I don't get it. He says it's all too horrible, too tangled, too

grotesque. His life is a shambles because of the damn computer, he says, so he wants to feed it to the fishes.

Then the dink sits down on a rock and starts bawling through his ski mask. This guy, I think, needs a weedwhacker for his brain. I sit down next to him and tell him I ain't a cop, that I work for Tracy Robards, and he says he knew it as soon as I asked for Sam the Lionhearted. He says he found out where she lived from a kid in Oakland called The King of the Hackers and he went over to her beach condo and watched her leave for work one morning, and that's when he saw what a knockout she was.

I tell him it's all about as clear as soap.

So he explains how they started writing each other on this network, and she started reading his poetry, and how she even got a poetry magazine to buy a few, and how he won an award, and how it was only her that inspired the poems, and how he fell in love with her and he told her he was six feet tall and he's really five eight, but worst of all, he said he was average-looking when in fact he had a hideous, disfigured face that no woman could ever love. He said he knew a chick who looked that great wouldn't give him the time of day. He says compared to him, Herman Munster was Cary Grant.

I says I got it now.

So I help the dink toss the chest off the cliff into the ocean, and when we're on the way back to the car, I'm figuring how to be creative about this. A dink like Magnum, he'd be lost. I says to this Molner dink that I'll report back to my client that he's really dead on one condition—that he pay me two thousand bucks. He looks at me through the eye holes in the ski mask and calls me a blank blank blackmailer. Hey, I says, business ain't been so good, you want me to do you a favor, you got to pony up, I got to make a living, too.

He'll pay, he says.

So I know this cretin named Benny the Toad who runs a girlie joint down in the Tenderloin called Satin and Silk, and I tell this Molner dink to meet me down there to give me the bread Monday 'cause on Monday the Satin and Silk ain't open. Time: 1100 hours. That's dick talk for eleven in the morning. I figure to give him time to get the two bang out of the bank.

Monday comes, and I got everything ready. I get this Tracy Robards to come with me and sit in Toad's office where there's a two-way mirror and you can see into the girls' dressing room where Toad and me have spent many a pleasant evening. Then I go into

the girls' dressing room and wait for Molner. At about two minutes after eleven Benny lets the dink in. He's wearing a coat with the collar up and a knit hat down over his head, and huge dark glasses so I can't see his face. First thing the dink says is he wants some proof that this is the only payment, and I tells him that Joe Smigelski is the straightest dick in San Francisco and when he says he's only gonna tap you once, that's it. I tell him I ain't about to lose my rep for nothing. He buys it, taking out the money and counting out twenty one-hundred bills, crisp and new smelling, fresh as new-cut grass.

He starts to leave, and I tell him to wait a minute, I want to see what he looks like on account of I'm real curious. He spits out some nasty words about my mother's sex life and starts for the door, but I block his way, reaching into my pocket where I got a hero sandwich for lunch but I make him think I got a heater, and I tell him to take off his hat and glasses and let me see or I'm going to open a portal to his liver. He steps back—the dumb dink thinks I'm gonna do it, catch—and he rips off his hat and glasses and damned if he ain't an ugh-o. His eyes are as close together as the barrels of a shotgun, and he's got a nose as flat as a dancehall floor. See what a geek he is, he says, sob, sob.

Man, I think, did I make a whopper of a mistake. Better to think he's dead than to think she was getting love poems from the Monster from the Black Lagoon.

But that's when I hear on the other side of the two-way mirror, from the Toad's office—we hear Tracy yelling that he's beautiful, catch? Then a second later she's running in and hugging this Molner dink and kissing him and he's hugging and kissing her, and the Toad comes in and he starts bawling, and a bunch of the girls who was hanging around rehearsing come in bawling, and maybe I got to use a Kleenex, too, but only because I got something in my eye. Real dicks never get mushy.

So two days later Tracy Robards and Samuel Lionel Molner go to Reno and commit matrimony, and about nine months and two days later she has a baby that they name Edgar after The King of the Hackers. Okay? See what I mean about a real dick being creative?

You probably want to know what happened to the two bang left on the table, which vanished like a puff of smoke in all the excitement and kissing and bawling. It was never found. Hey, unlike that dink Magnum, in the real dick world some mysteries ain't never solved. □

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FICTION

CASTING THE WITCH

J. A. Paul



Illustration by Kevin Stone

Alfred Hitchcock Mystery Magazine 2/96

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
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I thought ghosts clumped around in skeletal decay on dark stairs at midnight or floated around in sheet gowns under a full moon. No myth had prepared me to see one on the beach in broad daylight, so my amazement was doubled when I saw the ghost of my late wife Ariana, nearly twelve months dead and as tanned and fit in a blue bikini as ever she was in life, striding toward me.

It was almost noon on a clear summer day, meaning the sun was hot and high, a combination known to create optical illusions. No doubt I was proving the point. I looked away from the mirage and focused on the soothing waves of the Gulf.

Conjuring up the witch had spoiled my daydream of Petra and our approaching marriage. The wedding would exorcise Ariana once and for all, and if it were up to me, it would've taken place the day I received Ariana's insurance money. Petra was the stickler for propriety, the one who insisted we wait another two weeks to complete the traditional year of mourning. No one else thought our adulterous spouses deserved the salute.

A creak on the steps caused me to turn. Pounds of silky black hair piled above the aristocratic profile of a Greek goddess rose above the deck. After a brief pause, the rest of Ariana

ascended and advanced. A short terry cloth robe was folded over her arm; wet sand coated her toes. She really looked like living flesh and blood, but of course she wasn't. The apparition said, "Hello, Al. Handsome as ever, I see."

I knew I was asleep in the middle of a nightmare or I would've lunged for her throat across the redwood table, and what satisfaction would I gain from bursting back to consciousness with a chestful of splinters? But I glared at the spectre with all the indignance I could muster, for its mortal self had created a scandal of such splendor as to make the name of Albert Seibold the standard against which all cuckolded husbands have since been measured. Ariana burned to death with Clifford T. McCallister, the tycoon who was married to Petra, on a tryst aboard his yacht, a vessel later dubbed *The Lustboat*.

"Tch, tch. Still angry?"

Even dreaming, I wondered at what point she thought I'd earned the right to be angry. At the start—before the charred body of the woman who washed ashore with McCallister was identified but was whispered to be my faithful wife? Or later, when I called the decent people who claimed to have seen her on his yacht a pack of liars? Maybe

not until I insisted she was at a Swedish spa and, when the establishment denied it, I demanded the premises be searched? I wasn't angry then, for I still owned some pride.

And then they recovered clothes from the master bedroom of the boat that proved to be hers, and cut what was left of two rings—a cluster of rubies and a sapphire—from the fingers of the dead woman, rings that had been designed for Ariana. It was then I conceded that the indescribable remains at the morgue (I scarcely saw the scorched scalp before I fainted) *might* be my wife, though I wasn't convinced. I hunted myself for a dentist who had X-rays of Ariana's teeth to compare to the body's—implying the cops hadn't done their job—but found nothing. If she had a dentist, and surely she must have, he was a hermit isolated on one of the Mediterranean island universes her father once frequented, or he didn't read newspapers.

The ghost sat down, tore open a sugar packet, and poured its contents on the table. I knew what was coming. It would slide the granules into jewellike designs, then finish the game by pushing them into the letter A. It was an odd habit. I never saw anyone but Ariana do it.

"Your trust in me was touching," she said.

It touched madness. I didn't surrender until the fingerprint report came in. None of use could be obtained from the body, but some from the yacht matched those on Ariana's effects in our home, proof positive that she'd been on McCallister's boat. No man ever felt a greater fool than I, but it got worse. Rumors exploded that I'd killed them.

"Don't pout. I made sure you couldn't be charged with murder. Insurance companies don't pay murderers."

Charged, no. Questioned, yes. Mostly about whether I knew of the affair. Knowledge, apparently, converts to motive. I like to think they believed me when I swore I didn't, but in truth they believed my alibi for the night of the accident, especially since Ariana had provided it. She'd made the mistake of booking her trip to the spa on the same date of a political fundraiser, and she couldn't cancel the spa. Or so she said. The political plate was prepaid, and its price obscene. I attended in her place. It was lucky I did.

But while the truth satisfied the authorities, it starved the voracious appetites of the gossipmongers. In order to sate them, daily helpings of wild speculation were offered. One

memorable feeding was a front page story entitled "Seibold and McCallister's Wife Partners in Murder," a charge supported by "the revelation of a renowned psychic." Never mind that Petra and I were strangers. No one cared, and we learned it's impossible to prove you have *not* met someone. Even Petra's alibi, one completely different from mine, didn't quash the rumors. Our torment didn't end until the deaths were ruled accidental. Our joy began the day our personal questions drove us to seek each other out. We fell in love.

"Double indemnity, too. Now we must talk." The ghost poured itself a glass of lemonade and drank it all. I pinched my forearm with eyes closed. When I opened them, Ariana was still there. My life flashed before me. Not my past, my future. Again I was front page news, this time for returning four million dollars, for getting jilted by Petra, jailed for killing Ariana.

"All I want is money, Al. Half the insurance. When I get it, I'll disappear. Surely you can manage on two million, plus the millions Petra got for Cliff?"

I choked on my first words, "Is McCallister alive, too?"

"Of course not, don't be stupid."

Right. Unlike Ariana, McCallister left dental records in his

wake. I asked her how she knew about Petra.

"The impending union of rich, gullible halfwits is news."

The untrustworthy always mock those who trust, so I didn't take insult. "Where have you been? How did . . ." I couldn't organize my questions rationally.

"In Mexico. In a village that ignores American scandals."

"Evidently you kept yourself informed. Why didn't you let me know you were alive?" The sickening sight in the morgue came to me. "Wait, there was a woman . . ."

"That was Teresa, a maid of Cliff's. Also Mexican. If her relatives missed her, they didn't know where to begin looking."

My head was spinning. Teresa—the name rang a bell. Yes, Petra had told me about her. She was the maid at their beachhouse. The day of the accident had been the girl's day off. When she didn't return, Petra figured she'd heard about the deaths and took off before nosy reporters could expose her as an illegal alien. On Petra's side she didn't want it publicized that she'd hired an illegal, so she never mentioned the maid. I wondered why Teresa was on McCallister's yacht but didn't get the chance to ask.

"Never mind her. I want the money."

"The money was for your

death, Ariana. You're alive, so they get it back." My stomach lurched. Seventy-five grand of it was gone on Petra's engagement ring.

"No one else knows that," she said with a smile.

"They will when I put my divorce action on the front page of every ragsheet in the country! Quid quo pro," I snarled.

Ariana leaned forward. The smile was gone.

"You'll give me the money, Al. I spent a year with my hair smelling like fish for that money, with crude, unshaven hombres because they were the only men available. If you haven't already guessed, I killed two people for it. You'll give it to me or get thrown in the street."

"Killed?" I echoed.

She leaned back. "I wish you could see your face. You really are a puppy."

If I was, it was a stone puppy. My heart had stopped.

"Yes, killed. I needed money. Two million isn't much, but it will give me a jump start. Besides, erasing Cliff was added incentive. His monumental ego was insufferable. He spent half our time together grousing that I didn't love him enough to be seen with him in public. That last day I drove to the marina as bold as brass, making sure that everybody saw me. The arrogant fool thought I'd finally aban-

doned my reputation for him. I had, but the action suited the purpose."

I gulped in some air.

"If it really was you on the boat, where was the maid? No one saw any woman but you."

"We brought Teresa aboard in a trunk. She believed we were about to smuggle in one of her relatives, so she was happy to hide. Cliff loved the idea. He fancied himself a buccaneer."

Ariana stretched out her legs, turned her face skyward.

"But how did you escape the fire?"

"By getting off the boat, Al. By then my clothes were safely below and my fingerprints were on every surface. Don't you get it yet? I left myself all over the place. I *wanted* the police to think it was me, wanted them to suspect *you* of murder. Nothing beats the negative result of a thorough police investigation to force an insurance company to pay up."

She was right. My lawyers called a press conference to thank the cops for proving that the dead woman was Ariana, that my alibi was genuine, even for admitting there was evidence I knew about the affair. The insurance company had no option but to pay me, and double indemnity applied. They were good lawyers, a legacy

from Ariana's father. I got the money a month ago.

"I want it in bearer bonds," she said.

"Stop talking about money!" I wiped sweat from my brow and tried to figure out how so many people could be so wrong.

"Experts said the fire was caused by a negligent skipper, that after you both passed out, McCallister's cigar ash fell on some newspapers he was reading . . ."

Ariana interrupted.

" . . . and the burning paper ignited a pile of rags saturated with linseed oil. The deck chairs, planking, and railings were of wood, and so on. I know what they said. I waited long enough for them to say it. Six months too long, the idiots."

"You mean they were right?"

"Yes, except it wasn't an accident. It's child's play to start a fire. The hard part was getting Cliff and Teresa into a contest to see who could hold the most vodka. Of course their glasses were spiked with downers, while mine held water."

"You've just confessed to double homicide," I said.

Her relaxed position didn't change as she laughed.

"So what? Proof is what counts, and there isn't any."

"Your resurrection proves something!"

"Only that I lost a precious

year of my life. It wasn't until last week that I remembered a terrible fire, and trying bravely to rouse two unconscious shipmates, both so full of vodka and barbiturates that I couldn't budge their dead weight. How I waited until the last moment before I dropped the lifeboat into the water and escaped with my life. How I drifted for days until finally the little craft went down, how I swam and swam, must've lost consciousness, but luckily washed ashore in Mexico, barely alive and with amnesia, where my fluent Spanish confused even me, so my origin was a mystery. Go prove otherwise."

"Your rings were on the fingers of the dead woman."

"She was poor, asked to try on my jewelry. I let her."

Her previous words registered. In the street. I was newly rich and liked it.

"I plan well," she murmured, eyes closed against the sun.

"I'll still have the house," I declared lamely. "It's worth almost a million. I'll sell it and move in with Petra."

"I willed it to you. I'm alive, so I get it back. You'll have nothing, and Petra is accustomed to a rich husband."

I put Petra aside for the moment. If I couldn't prove Ariana was a murderess, what reason was there to tell anyone she was

alive? The loss of both money and house meant I'd go back to what I was before, a fairhaired pauper. Worse than that. When Ariana "died," I learned that the fortune her father had left her was gone, that we'd been living on credit card advances. I paid those bills. I paid the lawyers. With all that and Petra's ring I'd be roughly three hundred grand short when the insurance company came calling. I needed time to think.

"Did you really get to Mexico in a lifeboat?" She couldn't have. Hundreds of miles of water separated the burned yacht from any part of Mexico. The trip would take days in such a boat, and that was assuming you had the strength to row around the clock with mindless trust that stormless seas would guide you invisibly past cargo ships, fishing boats, and American and Mexican patrols. Ariana wouldn't plan an escape like that for any amount of money.

"It was a miracle. The villagers will swear to it."

"I bet." Had she paid them? No, she'd made them believe it.

"But if you're smart, they'll never be asked," she added. "Look at it this way, you'll be getting two million for free, while I had to earn mine by stoking a roaring inferno long enough to be sure it would burn two people to an unrecognizable

crisp." She covered a yawn with long, tapered fingers.

I stared at her. Ariana was still the most gorgeous woman I'd ever seen. Okay, I was a fortune hunter. Her money was the first attraction. But her beauty had been a close second, and by the "end" of our three year marriage I was mad about her. The joke was on me. Her father's money was long gone, and what lay beneath her facade was so ugly it shrank her infidelity to a minor infraction. She shook her head at a memory.

"Then half my work got washed overboard. How could I know a storm would blow up? Well, it worked anyway, possibly better."

How had she gotten here without being recognized? By avoiding the byways of her rich acquaintances, certainly. My housekeeper would recognize her, she was here when Ariana died, but the woman had just left on her vacation, the same week she took every year. Surely Ariana had checked that. I had another concern, Petra was coming for a swim in half an hour. Ariana stood up and gazed down at me.

"You see that you have no choice?" she asked.

I saw that I wanted her away from the house.

"All right. Two million. It'll take a few days."

"Of course. And now I need a nap. It's been a long year."

"A nap? Here? Petra is coming."

"Oh, is she? I'll use a guest room. They still lock, don't they? Surely Petra doesn't use a guest room?"

I ignored the innuendo.

"When are you leaving?" I demanded.

"When I get the money, Al. Not before."

"A temporary housekeeper is coming tomorrow."

"Cancel her today. As for Petra, act ordinary, but get rid of her before I wake up. I'll see you about four." She entered the house as if she owned it, which she did.

I paced the house in a frenzy, listening first to the rhythm of the shower, then to silence. Should I tell Petra? No! My wife was alive and well. Ergo, Petra wouldn't marry me.

I didn't hear Petra's car or her step on the walk. I didn't know she was there until I paced my way to the door and saw her at the redwood table. Her honey-colored hair was done in a single braid that reached her waist. She stood very still. Ariana was the type to fidget with whatever was at hand; Petra radiated inner calm. I went outside, careful

to slide the glass door shut behind me. She turned at my sound.

"And I thought she was as dead as rocks."

My mouth fell open. I glanced nervously back at the house.

"How did you know?" I whispered. So much for my resolve not to tell her.

Petra's eyes followed mine, then returned to rest upon me.

It was her turn to be astonished.

"I was speaking of her memory," she said softly. She pointed to the A of sugar granules on the table. "I used to see her doing this in the club dining room. I thought you were remembering. Al, what are you saying?"

I got her off the deck and down to the beach, told her everything as we walked safely out of earshot.

Fifty yards away we sat on the sand. Petra raised her knees and rested her arms on them. She was silent for a long time.

"You can't give it to her," she said finally.

"I don't want to, but would you marry me if I had no money?"

"Not if I thought you wanted me for mine."

"If I give her two million, I'll still have the other half, and you wouldn't worry."

She turned and examined my face, looking almost amused.

"You won't have it for long," she said.

"What do you mean?"

"She'll take the two million and hide it in a country that asks no questions. Then she'll come back for the other half."

"What? No, she won't. She said . . ."

"If you don't give it to her, she'll do what she's doing now, threaten to turn up alive with her sad story. Only next time you'll be short two million because you gave it to her, something you couldn't prove. You'd have to give her the rest to protect yourself."

"She said she'll disappear . . ." I began to feel sick.

"Al, can you see Ariana in hiding for the rest of her life? She'll merely postpone her miraculous recovery until she has the whole four million in her possession, leaving you owing it all to the insurance company."

Right now I'd only be three hundred grand short. A pitance. I stood up. "I'm calling the police," I said.

"No. You're forgetting something," said Petra. "That woman murdered my husband."

I sat down. Ariana had killed two people, though I didn't blame Petra for being mindful of the one. Over our heads a sea-gull screamed.

"All the more reason to call them," I said.

"Yes, but your word isn't proof. It won't be enough."

I put an arm around her shoulders. She sighed deeply.

"Cliff was a rotten husband. No more than a walking store of deceit, with more gall than any human being I've ever met. With the same lips that lied about where he'd been or where he was going he called me suspicious for not trusting him." Her eyes rested on the horizon, yet reflected an inner place even more distant.

"But he was my husband. As self-indulgent as he was, he'd never let anyone else hurt me, and he certainly wouldn't allow my murderer to go free, let alone profit. I think I owe him the same consideration. What time is it?" she asked abruptly.

I glanced at my watch. Only two hours had elapsed since Ariana climbed the steps of the deck. It seemed like a lifetime.

"It's one forty-five. Why?"

She stood up and brushed sand off her shapely fanny.

"Which direction did she come from?"

I pointed. Petra looked.

"There's a couple of cheap motels down there," she said.

I caught her meaning. Ariana would've used a stopover point to check things out before revealing herself to me. She'd pick a motel where there was little chance she'd be recognized, and

within walking distance of our house.

"She would've brought the key with her," Petra said.

My two guest bedrooms were connected by a bathroom. If Ariana had neglected to lock the bedroom next door, I could enter the one she was using through the bathroom. I prayed she was still a sound sleeper.

"What do you expect to find at the motel?" I asked.

"I don't know, but somehow we have to prove she's a killer, and we have to start somewhere."

I left Petra on the beach and went back to the house alone, wishing I'd sold it the day Ariana "died."

I got into the adjoining bedroom, but not because Ariana had forgotten to lock it. A small screwdriver did the job. The door of the bathroom was open on my side. I prayed her side was open, too, for she would surely hear the scratch of a screwdriver just a few feet from her bed.

I'd been thinking of the bathroom as a passageway so was surprised to see Ariana's beach robe on a towel rack and her bikini in the shower. I checked for a pocket in the lower half of the swimsuit but learned they're different from men's swimming trunks, for there wasn't any. The zippered pockets of the robe

showed bulges. Not wishing to linger, I grabbed the robe and left, leaving the doors unlocked behind me.

Petra was waiting. We unzipped the pockets and found a comb, a turban, an enormous pair of sunglasses, but no key. Instead we found what appeared to be a credit card. A closer look told us it was a pass-card for the door of a motel room.

Petra put on the sunglasses and robe, then tucked her long braid under the turban. The simple beachwear was effective; she was barely recognizable. Ariana knew what she was doing.

"Let's go," said Petra.

Ten minutes later we were at the motel whose logo was on the card. Guests on the patio drank their drinks and listened to blaring music without giving us a second glance. We used the beach entrance and took the stairs to the second floor. Someone's television was tuned loudly to MTV, forcing other guests to increase the volume of their soap operas. The combination resulted in deafening gibberish. At room 214, we slipped the card in the lockbox and plunged it downward. Green lights twinkled. We turned the knob and entered.

Most of the room was taken up by a king-size bed, which was tidy. That plus fresh towels in

the bathroom said we wouldn't be surprised by a maid. We took inventory.

On the floor of the closet was a canvas satchel and a pair of white shoes. Two dresses were on metal hangers. One was lightweight cotton printed with tiny flowers, the other was of dungaree material. Ariana loved expensive clothes. The middle-class garments would've elicited sympathy if I hadn't known that every piece was a prop. Petra came out of the bathroom minus the sunglasses and turban and carrying a plastic cosmetic case. I did my part and took the satchel to the dresser.

Inside was underwear costing more than all the outerwear combined. When I drew out a white handbag, Petra left the toiletries and joined me. We pulled out a sheaf of papers. They were in Spanish, but the name on them was clear enough.

"Teresa Sanchez. This must be your maid's I.D.," I said.

"That's how she got into Mexico," said Petra.

"So much for the lifeboat story," I said.

"Oh, she took the lifeboat," said Petra. "It was missing. We assumed the storm washed it overboard along with everything else on deck. Remember, almost everything burned to ashes."

"Okay, she took it," I said.

"She got the fire going, then lowered the boat and rowed—where?—back to shore in the USA, probably to an isolated marsh? Then she went overland into Mexico with your maid's identification."

"Yes, but she didn't have to row. Cliff had the lifeboat fitted with a low-powered outboard." Petra looked thoughtful for a moment. "That was probably her idea. He only added the engine the week before he died. I'll bet she got hold of one of his guns, too. Without one, I doubt she'd have gone ashore in a lonely marsh at night."

Wearily, I went to the bed and sat on it.

"Look at this," Petra said, holding out a receipt. "She paid cash for this room at four A.M. this morning."

"Cover of darkness. No wonder she's tired." A thought came to me like a shot of adrenaline. I jumped up.

"We've got her! She's running around with your maid's I.D.! If we take it to the cops, they'll get Teresa's dental records and match them to the corpse. Ariana would have to explain how she came by the papers. She must have known Teresa was dead!"

"It doesn't prove anything," said Petra. "She'll say she grabbed something before she escaped the flaming boat. It

happened to be Teresa's handbag. With amnesia she thought the I.D. was hers until her memory returned."

I walked to the window. It overlooked a parking lot, a view not likely to improve my mental acuity.

Petra was sniffing the jars and vials in the cosmetic bag.

"We could set her up," I offered. "I could call the cops and have them videotape me handing the bonds to her."

"Not bad," said Petra. "Except she'd claim that splitting the money was your idea. She returned, expecting a hearty welcome, and found her husband engaged to another woman and advising her to stay dead so she could stay rich. Poor thing. By the time she finished, you'd be the one in jail."

"You're not very encouraging," I said.

"I'm sorry." She came to me, flicking a hand at the room. "There's nothing incriminating here, not even an illegal pill." Drawing me over to the bed, she pulled me down next to her. We sat holding hands. She spoke quietly.

"Al, the only thing Ariana couldn't have anticipated is the relationship that developed between you and me. And what does she know about me? That I was a wealthy, scorned wife. Only that. She never knew I was

drawing up divorce papers because no one but my lawyer did, and he suppressed them after the accident."

"What difference would it make if she knew?" I asked.

"The difference is, Ariana doesn't know I'm a fighter. When she found out about us, she must've wondered what I'd do if you told me. She didn't alter her plans, so she's not worried."

I pulled Petra close. "Worried or not, she'll be pretty ticked off when I don't pay her."

"That's not enough."

"What else can we do?"

"Make her pay with her life."

"What?" I leaped to my feet and backed up. Did everyone regard murder as a viable solution to a problem?

"Al, she incinerated two people, and we can't prove it."

"Maybe we can find the lifeboat on the beach somewhere," I stammered. "Or maybe someone in Mexico saw her..."

She looked at me hard. "Darling, she sank the lifeboat in a marsh, and only some fish might know where that is. The Mexican village was chosen carefully in advance, and whatever day she arrived, you can bet it was before dawn. Then she gave herself a few bruises, lay down on the beach, and slept

peacefully until she was 'discovered' at sunrise."

"She must've made some mistake. They say . . ."

"Forget what they say. This is really quite brilliant. The only mistake she made was underestimating me, and I won't make the same one. To underestimate Ariana is to wind up destitute, or a corpse."

"I can't kill her," I said.

"You don't have to," said Petra. "It was my husband she murdered. I'll do it."

"There's got to be another way. Let me think."

"What time is it?" she asked.

Ariana expected to see me at four. I tore my eyes from Petra's face and looked at my wrist. "It's two forty," I said.

"Well, start thinking. You haven't much time."

Believe it or not, I got an idea two minutes later.

"I'll set up a tape recorder," I said. "I'll get her to say the same things—admit the murders, ask for the money. When I take it to the cops, they'll arrest her."

"Sounds good," said Petra.

After the scene we'd just been through, I was suspicious.

"Do you mean it?" I asked.

She stood up and kissed me on the cheek. "It's a wonderful idea, darling! I don't know why I never thought of it."

Her admiration warmed me. I needed it. The prospect of sur-

rendering four million dollars was chilling. Well, easy come, easy go.

"I'll set up the tape before she wakes up," I said.

Petra glanced at the meagre wardrobe. "We should take these things with us."

We used the satchel, careful to tuck in the I.D. and the guest receipt, items Petra said were supporting evidence. Again she wrapped herself in Ariana's beachwear, and we left.

This time we went by way of the road instead of the shore. On the way Petra asked, "Have you wondered about the fortuitous appearance of Teresa?"

"I told you what Ariana said," I reminded her. "The girl went voluntarily and stayed out of sight. She thought they were bringing in one of her relatives."

"Yes, but when did Ariana make this plan? After she saw Teresa and noticed the girl's resemblance to herself? That means she planned it all in two weeks. I know it was she who urged Cliff to hire Teresa. He told me the girl was homeless."

"What are you getting at?"

"I think the scheme came first, then she hunted for a woman who could pass muster for size and age, one who wouldn't be missed right away."

"That's diabolical," I said.

"Indeed it is," Petra agreed.

"What I don't understand," I

said, "is why she didn't knock me off. I had as much insurance."

"Engineering an accident isn't easy, and spouses are always suspect when so much insurance is involved."

"But this seems so complicated . . ."

"Not really. Once she got away with starting the fire, she was home free. If she'd been observed in the marsh, her escape from the yacht would've been 'miraculous.' If Teresa's I.D. got her detained at the border, she would've faked amnesia. The cunning part is that she didn't profit from Cliff's death, so no one would suspect her of killing him. Not even me. What remained was getting you to give her half of her own life insurance, to convince you that half a loaf is better than none."

And Ariana knew I could be convinced, knew I was a man who could be bought. I had always known it, too, though I never realized I would protect a murderess, not even for two million dollars. At this level, self-awareness was painful. I raised Petra's hand and kissed it, grateful for the conscience she offered.

When we reached her car, she stripped off Ariana's accessories with visible pleasure, putting the glasses, turban, and pass-card in the original pockets and

zipping them closed. I put the satchel in the trunk. It was just after three o'clock. I told Petra I'd call when I got something useful on tape. Our parting kiss was dull. I put it down to mental exhaustion. By then I was over the shock of her suggestion to kill Ariana. Murder had been one of my first reactions, too.

I tiptoed up the stairs, thankful for the thick wall of foliage that concealed Petra's car from the house. The first order of business was to return the robe to the bathroom.

The second bedroom door was still unlocked, as I'd left it. No noises, save the gentle sighs of sleep came from Ariana's room on the other side of the bath. If the wicked thrash fitfully in remorse, she wasn't proving it. I hung the robe as before. This time I locked up, as Ariana had originally.

I found a recorder in my desk and some fresh batteries for it. The tape was no problem; my answering machine used the same type. All I needed was a place to hide the recorder. I chose the kitchen on the basis that sooner or later everybody gets hungry, even homicidal she-devils.

She woke up a few minutes after four. When I heard her, I went to the kitchen and pressed the red record button. The tape would run for an hour, plenty of

time for her to brag of murder and demand a reward for it. I made a pot of coffee and sat at the table, back to the window, facing the room.

She came in wearing a T-shirt and a pair of slacks, clothes that belonged to Petra. The irony of each of them in the other's clothes wasn't lost on me, but it wasn't amusing. Ariana saw the coffeepot and sniffed appreciatively.

"For me? How nice. Have you made those calls yet?"

"No."

She poured herself a cup. I held my breath as she went to the refrigerator, reminding myself that she couldn't see the recorder on top of it, well above her head.

"Don't you think you should?" she asked sweetly.

"Why?" I asked.

She poured in milk, then took the chair opposite me.

"Don't you have things to tell people, Al? Things to do?" She turned her head and studied the counter, then leaned over and made a show of looking under the table. She was onto me.

"What things?" I prodded, feeling as transparent as air. If she didn't speak, I'd have nothing for the police. She'd walk away free. Not as wealthy as she'd planned, but free.

Her face underwent a remarkable transformation, mouth

twisting to a vicious slash, eyes full of savagery, boring into me like lasers. I don't know what she might have done if something outside hadn't caught her attention.

"You have company. Whoever he is, get rid of him." She got up and left the room, taking her cup with her. A bedroom door closed.

I looked out the window. A motorboat was coming close in. I couldn't yet make out the pilot. A minute later the outboard engine was flipped up and an oar appeared. The craft rode the back of a wave and came ashore cleanly. By then I'd recognized *My Pet*, the motorboat McCallister had given Petra for their fifth wedding anniversary. The navigator was hidden under a hooded sweatshirt, but I knew who it was. I ran outside.

By the time I got there, Petra was on dry sand, untying the hood of the oversized shirt she wore. She pulled her braid free and asked, "Is she awake yet?"

I nodded.

"Damn." She kicked sand, creating a gritty shower.

"What's wrong? Why did you come?"

She turned and made for the house. I caught up with her.

"What did you get on tape?" she asked.

"Nothing."

"That's why I came," she said.

"I don't think she'll talk to you, either. She's suspicious. It's as if she knows about the recorder."

"Of course she knows," said Petra.

Suddenly I felt like an audience of one, like I wasn't part of the play at all.

We had come to the bottom of the stairs. Petra gazed up at me with an odd look in her eyes, a reminder of Ariana's contempt when she'd called me a puppy. Petra's gaze was softer, but it wasn't full of admiration, either.

"Ariana said what she had to say when she first arrived, Al, before there was time to set a trap. She won't repeat it."

"Then why did you tell me it was a great idea?"

"To calm you down." She smiled and patted my arm, climbed the stairs, and opened the glass door with her left hand. Her right was deep in the pocket of the baggy sweatshirt. I froze where I was—stunned, irrelevant, and afraid.

The house was a solid one, well insulated against heat and wind, and of course the windows and doors were shut tight to keep the air conditioning where it belonged. But it wasn't sound-proof. I wished it was. The shot wasn't loud, just a small, sharp crack. But I heard it.

My knees gave out. I sat down on the steps and looked along

the expanse of beach to where bathers splashed in the water near the motels. A couple of them looked like toddlers. I hoped their parents were watching them. A dog was racing around. Dogs aren't allowed on the beach without a leash. Petra called to me from the doorway.

"It's all right now, darling. You can come in."

Ariana sat dead in the upholstered chair in the guest room, a bullet hole in her chest, her coffee still warm on the table beside her. She looked surprised.

Like a puppet under Petra's direction, I fetched the items she requested, prepared them according to her wishes.

First I tore a trash bag lengthwise and laid it on the floor, then spread a sheet over it.

"Lay her on it," said Petra.

I did, and she removed the clothes Ariana was wearing that actually belonged to herself. And then, for a reason I couldn't fathom, we tied Ariana's naked body into a tight fetal position with a length of rope. There was blood on my hands and forearms. I went to wash it off. When I got back, Petra already had the body wrapped in the sheet. Together we tucked the black plastic around it. Ariana looked like a neat package of garbage.

"Bring soap and rags, I'll get the water," said Petra.

There was no blood on the carpet, little on my shirt, but plenty on the chair. Petra's scrubbing washed it away easily, probably because it was fresh. She used a hair dryer on the wetness. Job done, she appraised her work.

"It wouldn't pass forensic examination, but that's a moot point. By morning it should be dry." She looked at me closely. "Are you all right?"

"I'm okay," I said.

"You needn't worry. She was dead, remember? There won't be a single question."

I was staring at the bundle.

"Did she say anything?" I asked.

"Only when I told her it was for Cliff. She said, 'If I were you, I'd thank me for killing that rat.' I suppose she thought adultery was a capital offense. For husbands, anyway."

"What now?" I asked. I was past pretending I would be consulted.

"We wait until dark, then bury her at sea."

The hours that followed were interminable. The phone rang twice. The first call was from the housekeeper confirming her arrival the following morning, the second from a friend inviting Petra and me to an evening of jai alai on Saturday. I checked with Petra. She reminded me of plans to dine with her parents. We

turned on the television. I don't know what we watched.

After dark Petra went outside. I thought it was to ready the boat, and I offered my help, but she didn't want it and I didn't insist. Ten minutes later she returned with a flat metal contraption. I asked her what it was.

"The dog pen I used for Samson before he was housebroken."

Samson was a Great Dane, so even as a pup he had needed a big pen. It was collapsed for storage. I turned off the television and followed her into the bedroom.

The reason for the fetal position became clear. Compacted as she was, Ariana fit neatly on the huge aluminum tray floor of the cage. Petra assembled the walls around her by sliding metal fasteners into place. She left the roof of the pen hanging loose on the outside.

Taking a side each, we carried the cage down to the boat. If curious eyes were watching, they would think we were carrying a large fisherman's trap.

The boat was in shallow water. We set the pen down near the grabrail, and oar in hand, Petra shoved off.

She was an experienced skipper, working around and over the small waves instead of bucking straight into them. As

soon as we were safely in deep water, she started the engine. We kept an eye on the lights we saw from other craft, but they were well away and presented little threat of discovery. I was beginning to think we were heading for Mexico ourselves when Petra cut the engine. The world became utterly soundless. When my ears adjusted, I heard waves lapping at the sides of the gently rocking boat.

Petra opened a seat locker and came out with a flashlight. I held it as she unwound the wrappings, exposing Ariana's naked body to the dark heavens. Another rummage produced a length of wire. She used it to tie Ariana's wrists to the bars of the cage. Next she swung the roof up and secured it to the walls. Then she opened the door as if to let out the dog.

She motioned for the flashlight, and I gave it to her. As she illuminated various parts of the boat for me, I located weights she must've distributed earlier, round iron disks that usually go on barbells. One by one she put them through the door, some of them under the body. For good measure, she tied on an anchor, balancing the weighted end on the side of the boat.

"Okay, this is it. Quickly, now," she whispered.

I stood up, wobbling.

"Shouldn't we close the door?"

I whispered. Voice levels increase threefold over water. She shook her head.

The pen was incredibly heavier now. Petra hooked a foot around the post of the grabrail and advised me to stay as far from the side as I could manage.

We lifted in tandem and heaved our grisly baggage overboard. The anchor followed the pen, a reversal of the norm, which was probably why neither of us followed it in. I lunged for the opposite side of the listing boat the moment the cage left my hands. Petra's final prayer for Ariana was short.

"Go with Satan," she whispered. She underscored the eulogy by hurling the gun she'd used on Ariana into the black, undulating deep.

And then we were off, me choking on bile.

The salty breeze sanitized my insides as we sped back to shore. Halfway there, my questions gurgled up.

"Don't you think that was overkill?" I asked, intending no pun.

"How so?" She was piloting the boat without a quiver.

"Why the pen? Why enclose her, then open the damn door?"

"Loose bodies wash ashore," Petra said over the roar of the engine. I moved closer so she could lower her voice.

"Tying them down isn't

enough," she continued. "The ocean floor isn't tranquil. Tremors churn up rocks and bits of old iron down there all the time, things that can cut lines easily. That means a loose body even if it was tied to a freight train. Do you see?"

I saw. Most murderers relied on a tether.

"Instead, we fashioned a tomb weighted on the inside and tied her to it, which means she can't come up even if the pen gets crushed. And while the doorway is too small for her to float out, it's big enough for sizable fish to enter. In a month there won't be anything left to identify, even if an underground volcano blew the whole thing skyward."

Lights from the motels twinkled on shore. Petra banked right and found the back of a wave while I tried not to think of fish tearing at Ariana's flesh.

I carried the sheet and the plastic into the house. Inside I asked my final question.

"You planned all that on a ten minute drive home?"

"Not all," she answered. "I couldn't think of a weight that was heavy enough but easy to handle. It was a relief when I came across Cliff's old barbells."

I stayed in the living room while Petra washed and dried the bloody sheet and clothes. The shirt with the bullet hole was disposed of but not before its damage looked like ordinary rips. Petra plans well, too.

When I postponed our wedding the second time, Petra got the message. Last month I saw her with another man. She looked happy. When she waved, I waved back. She knows she's safe. If my silence could've been bought for two million, she's pretty sure four million buys twice as much. Besides, I could've run up the deck stairs and stopped her. I didn't, and I don't think temporary paralysis exonerates me.

Petra was right, Ariana got away with murder, and would've followed through until she got all the money. But it hit me that night that scheming and killing for money, and scheming and killing for revenge, are not dissimilar. Both require multipotent minds and an absence of conscience, qualities found in witches, not women. Since I can only guess which is which, I don't date a lady more than once or twice any more. I don't guess well.

FICTION



CRISPY CRITTER

James A. Noble

When police sergeant Joe Healy arrived at the downtown bank in response to the "man with a bomb" call, he didn't find anything he had expected. Officers were busy escorting pedestrians behind police barricades while the bomb squad was relaxing around its flatbed trailer. On top of the trailer sat the large reinforced bombproof canister the squad fondly referred to as The Bucket.

"Excuse me, fellas," he yelled at the bomb squad. "Maybe you got something to do around here? Huh?"

One of the crew shrugged at him, but no one spoke. He turned his attention to one of the officers.

"Hey, Williams! What's with the barricades? You got them too close to the bank. People could be injured from flying glass, you know."

"No chance," responded Officer Williams. "The bomb is locked safely in the bank vault . . . along with the robber."

"You're kidding. How many hostages has he got with him?"

Williams shook his head. "None. The bank was closed today. Apparently the poor slob accidentally locked himself in the vault with his own live time bomb."

Sergeant Joe Healy paused a moment to reflect.

"Yeah, I don't understand it either," said Williams in response to Healy's puzzled look. "Talk to that fellow over there." He pointed to a well-dressed man standing just in front of one of the barricades. "He spoke to the guy last. I think he's a bank official of some sort."

Albert Fergeson, the bank vice-president, shook his head sadly. "Quite pitiful, the man is. I've just been talking with him on the intercom. He's in-quite a dither."

"How'd he manage to, ah . . ."

"Yesterday afternoon, Friday that is, he came into the bank carrying a briefcase and rented a safe deposit box. He and one of the tellers entered the vault, and he put some small envelopes into his box and left. Apparently, neither the teller nor anyone else noticed that he'd slipped the briefcase behind some old file cabinets we keep in the vault to hold papers."

"After closing yesterday, as we do every few years, we removed the racks of safe deposit boxes from our vault and transported them by armored car to one of our branch office vaults so painters and cleaners could come in on the weekend to renovate the interior of the vault. Since the file cabinets contain nothing of any monetary value to anyone, we left them in place, figuring the workers could move

them out of the way as needed. We didn't notice the briefcase.

"We also left the vault door open a crack so the workers could get inside to do their work. We propped it open with a chair. It has a tendency to close by itself, unfortunately.

"When the workers arrived this morning, the vault door was shut and locked, and the intercom was buzzing frantically. The workers called me. I came in and talked briefly with the bank robber over the intercom and then called the police."

"I gather you can't just open the vault," said Healy.

"I'm afraid not. The vault automatically latches and resets the time lock when we close it in the evening every day. It won't open until seven A.M. the following day.

"Since the unfortunate robber let the vault door close behind him sometime after seven this morning, it can't be opened until tomorrow morning at the earliest."

Healy looked at his watch. "That's a long time. Will he have enough air?"

"Oh, most definitely. It's quite a roomy enclosure, you know. Besides, long before then the bomb should end any breathing difficulties the poor man may encounter."

"Oh yeah. The bomb. I gather it's in the briefcase."

"So he gave me to understand."

"Is it his bomb?"

"I believe so."

"Why doesn't he just disarm it?"

Ferguson shrugged.

"I guess I'd better talk to him," said Healy. "Where's that intercom you mentioned?"

"It's on the desk just inside the main entrance to the bank. Push the lever on the left to talk. Let it up to listen."

Despite strong protests from several nearby officers and a few members of the bomb squad, Healy walked inside and sat down at the desk in the deserted bank. Ferguson was not to be denied either. He slipped behind Healy and stood next to him at the desk.

"Wouldn't you be safer outside?" asked Healy.

"Quite," replied Ferguson simply.

Healy just shook his head and pressed the lever. He spoke into the top of the intercom unit.

"Hello? You in there?"

"No, you idiot," shouted the voice from the speaker. "I just flew to New Hampshire. Of course I'm in here! Where'd you think I could go?"

"Just take it easy, son."

"I ain't your son."

"Of course you're not. You wouldn't catch me fathering a

kid stupid enough to lock himself in a vault with a bomb."

"Okay, so I got your lecture and I'm going to jail," said the robber. "Now, how about opening this vault before this bomb in here blows."

"Can't. It's on a time lock. It can't be opened until seven in the morning."

"Oh . . ." The man moaned pitifully. "I should have stayed in bed."

"What's your name, son?"

"Larry, Larry Lundo. My friends call me Lucky."

Healy and Fergeson looked at each other. Healy leaned back over the intercom.

"Well, ah, Lucky. Is that *your* bomb you're in there with?"

"Yeah. Practically the whole briefcase is filled with plastique. That's enough to turn this vault into a zillion toasters."

"That won't help your complexion any. Why don't you disarm it?"

Lundo became upset again.

"Don't you think I'd do that if I could? I'm not stupid, you know."

"You're the one in the vault," noted Healy. "When's it set to detonate?"

"It doesn't have an ordinary timer," explained Lundo. "It's sort of hard to know precisely when it will blow."

"Tell me about it."

"You mean right now? This

thing could go at any time." Lundo sounded panic-stricken.

"So what. Tell me about it. You haven't got anything better to do, do you?"

Healy could hear Lundo sigh over the intercom.

"Okay, I built this bomb and hid it in a briefcase which I left behind some cabinets in the vault yesterday afternoon. The bank is normally closed on Saturdays, so I thought no one would be here. I figured the bomb would go off sometime early this morning and blow the vault door off, so I disengaged the security system and waited outside.

"After a while, I didn't hear any explosion, so I entered the bank. I found the vault door open a crack. I stepped inside and leaned over the file cabinets to look at where I'd put the briefcase, and I inadvertently kicked away some chair holding the door open. The last thing I saw before door was closed and cut off all the outside light was the briefcase, intact and undamaged."

"How does the bomb detonate, Lucky?"

"Batteries feed power to a relay through two wires," Lundo explained. "As long as the relay is getting power, everything is okay. When the batteries run down, the relay releases and

the explosives blow through another separate circuit."

"So what happened?"

"I dunno. These batteries must be stronger than the ones I used to time-test the relay release. They must still be feeding power to the relay, but they surely can't last much longer."

"Let me get this straight. If you pull the wires from the batteries to the relay, the bomb will blow. But if you pull the wires from the explosives, the bomb will be disarmed. Right?"

"You got it."

"Are the wires color-coded?"

"Yeah. Battery wires are white. Explosive wires are red."

"So, yank either of the two red wires."

"I can't. I can't see a damn thing. There's no light in here."

"There's an inside light switch just to the left of the vault door," said Ferguson, leaning over Healy's shoulder and speaking into the intercom.

"Already tried that. Forget it, man," said Lucky. "The bulb's blown."

"No matches, lighter, pen light?" Healy asked.

"Nothing," replied Lucky. "Not even two sticks to rub together."

Healy looked down at his intercom. There were no lighted buttons on it.

"His intercom is exactly the same," said Ferguson.

"Could we drill a hole in the

door and pass some sort of light source through?" asked the sergeant.

Ferguson shook his head. "Carbide steel. It would take all day."

"Can't you feel your way through the circuit?" said Healy into the intercom. "Maybe you could slip something between the relay contacts."

"No way. By now that relay is barely getting enough power to stay closed. If I jar it even slightly, it'll release and I'll end up looking like week-old roadkill on a freeway exit ramp. Everything is packed too tightly in that briefcase. Only the wires are available."

"He has a fifty-fifty chance of pulling the correct wire," said Ferguson. "He *has* to attempt it. If he waits any longer, the batteries could become too weak and the bomb will detonate in any case."

"I heard that," said Lundo. "He's right. I got to go for it now."

"No, wait," ordered Healy. "If you're smart enough to make that bomb, you should be smart enough to make enough light to see the color of the wires."

"How?"

"Unscrew the dead bulb from its socket. Take a short insulated wire and scrape it across the contacts of the socket. It should make enough sparks for you to

see briefly which wires are red and which are white. Be careful not to electrocute yourself."

"The circuit breaker will blow."

"No, it won't because I'm going to hold it closed out here."

"Where am I going to find any wire?"

"Pull your intercom apart. There will be wires in there."

"I can't do that. I'll miss talking to you too much," said Lundo cheerfully. "You're a bloody genius."

"When you have successfully disarmed the bomb, bang on the vault door twice with something hard so we'll know you're finished," Healy said.

"Sure thing," replied Lundo. "And if I fail, I'll bang on the door once with assorted parts of my entire body. See you tomorrow. Over and out."

There was a crackle on the speaker, and the intercom went dead.

"You take cover in case he doesn't make it," said Healy. "Point me to the breaker box."

Ferguson pointed. "It's right there," he said sheepishly. "Next to the vault door."

Healy rolled his eyes. "Oh, great."

If Lundo failed, Healy would be a crispy critter like Lucky.

While Ferguson headed for the opposite end of the bank, Healy opened the door to the circuit breakers, found the one marked "Vault Lights," and held it firmly against the on or closed position.

For some reason, he shut his eyes and gritted his teeth as if that would somehow brace him against the horrific explosion that could follow. Then he smiled, chuckled briefly at his own futile gesture, and relaxed.

Three minutes later, there were two muffled bangs on the vault door.

"He's done it," cheered Ferguson, emerging from behind a far office wall, "or rather you've done it."

"Yeah, but I think he's going to feel mighty bad tomorrow," said Healy.

"You mean being arrested?"

"No, I mean a severe headache," Healy said. "I'm pretty sure that sound from the vault was Lundo banging his head against the door."

THE MYSTERIOUS PHOTOGRAPH



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And hang your clothes on a hickory limb, but don't go near the water. We will give a prize of \$25 to the person who invents the best mystery story (in 250 words or less, and be sure to include a crime), based on the above photograph. The story will be printed in a future issue. Reply to Alfred Hitchcock Mystery Magazine, 1540 Broadway, New York, New York 10036. Please label your entry "February Contest," and be sure your name and address are written on the story you submit. If possible, please also include your Social Security number.

The winning entry for the October Mysterious Photograph contest will be found on page 157.

FICTION

THE DREAM KILLERS

Terry
Courtney

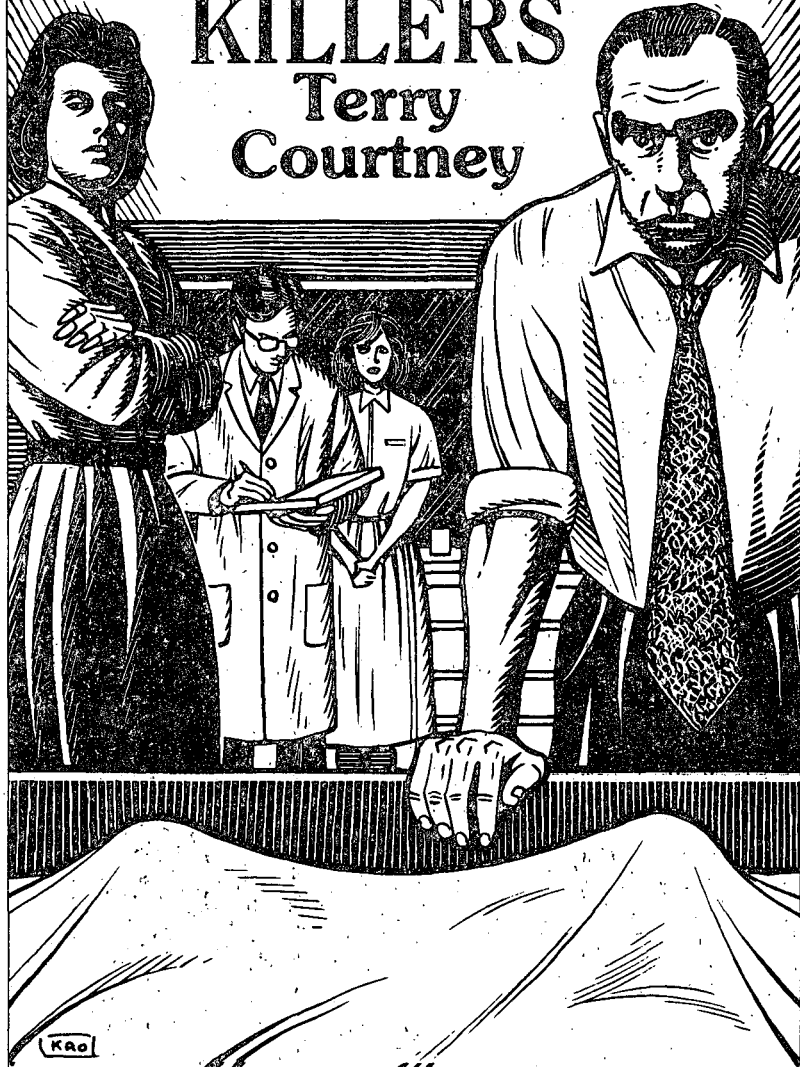


Illustration by Dan Krowatin

Alfred Hitchcock Mystery Magazine 2/96

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When Captain Noblitt assumed command of the Homicide Division six years earlier, he introduced an innovative corporate think-tank methodology to the operation. Each Tuesday and Friday morning the ten detectives composing five homicide investigation teams, plus a sergeant and the captain, met in an interrogation room, where each team brought the group up to date on the details or progress of their open cases. Everyone was then invited to comment and to make suggestions. It had the effect of twelve men contributing their expertise to each case. Captain Noblitt's reply to the scoffing traditionalists was invariably a laconic, "It works."

At eight o'clock on a sunny Tuesday morning in early September the division assembled. Last up were Frank Whalen and Leo Schott. As Schott opened his notebook, Whalen said, "For the record, we were called at home again on a Sunday night. I was about to watch a great movie, and Leo has a wife so who knows what he was about to do. What's a day off, Daddy?" Whalen grinned as he endured the expected unsympathetic ribald comments.

Schott said, "Now?," and Whalen nodded. "Sunday night. Fancy neighborhood. Auburn Park. Two victims. Harold Cubbison,

fifty-three. A Ph.D., he was a department chairman at the university. His wife, Irene Cubbison, also fifty-three. Principal at North High."

"I know who she is. My daughter goes to North."

"They were stabbed in the chest three times each. The autopsy confirmed that they'd been dead about forty-eight hours when we got there, since Friday night. They were found at nine thirty by their son, who claimed he was in the vicinity and stopped by to say hello. He found the house dark but both cars in the driveway. He rang and pounded but no answer. Went around the house, but it was locked up tight. In the back yard by the patio door he thought he saw something on the family room floor. He went next door and got a neighbor with a flashlight. When they saw the bodies, the neighbor ran back home and called us. An ambulance arrived first, and a paramedic took one look, couldn't tell if the victims were alive or dead, and punched a hole in the patio door glass. Too late. Rigor mortis had come and gone." Schott turned a page. "The knife sticking in the dead man's chest came from a set in a kitchen drawer. No sign of forced entry, no apparent burglary, no evidence of a struggle, no obvious ransacking of the

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kitchen for the knife, the neighbors saw nothing unusual, zero. In spite of that, the son insisted it had to be a prowler, an intruder. Claimed his parents were without enemies. Sweet, gentle people universally loved and respected."

Whalen looked up. "Too often victims are depicted as saints, and that always makes me uncomfortable. There are no perfect human beings with the exception of Leo and me."

"Amen," Schott murmured, and the partners grinned at each other. A team for over ten years, they were more than comfortable working together and being friends. Forty years old, their birthdays were three weeks apart. Leo Schott looked his age and a bit more, his gray-blond hair thinning, eyes pouchy, deep lines accenting his mouth. Frank Whalen had a full head of curly auburn hair and a smooth face. He could easily pass for ten years younger than his age, which he had frequently done since his divorce.

Whalen's smile melted. "Actually, we checked the victims out yesterday. Leo did the high school, and I took the university. We heard nothing but good about the Cubbisons. Not one discouraging word."

Schott nodded his agreement. "We both sensed all their col-

leagues were truly and deeply grieved by their deaths."

"This is September," Whalen added. "If their friends are to be believed, the Cubbisons will be canonized by Thanksgiving. Too good to be true."

"What's the story on the son?"

"We're glad you asked." Whalen flipped open his notebook. "Robert Cubbison. Thirty. A C.P.A. on his own. Claimed an alibi for Friday night that didn't check out. Said he was playing piano at a jazz club where three to four hundred people saw him, and we assumed he meant until closing. Friday nights the club has an open jam. That's where any talented musician is welcome to go in and play. The owner said the son sat in on the first set only, eight to nine thirty. Amateurs usually play the first set, and then the out-of-work pros take over. The owner couldn't be sure one way or the other whether the son stayed or left after that set. Said Friday nights the club is wall-to-wall bodies. Oh, there's also a daughter who lives in San Diego."

Schott unfolded stapled sheets. "The autopsy and forensic reports are a washout. Heart penetration and significant blood loss. They died between eight and midnight Friday. Forensics, nothing. No prints on the knife handle, no strange



prints anywhere, including the front door handle and knob, which is how we think the killer or killers left. The rest of the house was locked up, and the front door locks automatically unless you set it. Three of the son's prints, two on the refrigerator, one on an end table. He told us he was there Thursday, so those prints are useless. Absolutely no evidence of a stranger, and hello, son Robert."

"He should have set the scene. Forced something."

"Possibly panic. We think he insisted it was an intruder too loud and long, so we plan a good look at him. How's his business? Does he have any expensive habits he can't afford? Did he secretly hate his parents because they told him about the birds but forgot to mention the bees? Apparently the victims knew, or at least let in, whoever did them in. For now, the son is prime, especially since he misled us on his alibi. It could be money. I don't think the Cubbisons were super-rich, but that house is two fifty, three hundred thou at least. They both had good jobs. We've got a call in to their lawyer."

Captain Noblitt shuffled papers together. "Any comments? All right, you seem to have it covered so far. Keep me informed. Now go catch those bad guys and girls, people."

Whalen and Schott stopped to see the General Assignment Division captain and arranged to borrow four of his detectives, scheduling a meeting for after lunch.

As the partners settled at their facing desks in the nearly deserted Homicide Division squad room, Schott's telephone rang. Whalen studied his notes until Schott hung up with a flourish. "The Cubbison lawyer. A simple will. The son and daughter split the estate down the middle. The daughter is executor. His best guess is half a million, the biggest part being that nice paid-for house."

"Look, Ma, it *does* grow on trees. And the daughter is executor. That's interesting."

"Like maybe they didn't trust their son."

"Maybe with good . . ." Whalen's telephone rang. He answered it, listened, and frowned. "Who is he? . . . Did he say exactly what? . . . All right, I'll be down." Whalen dropped the receiver with a bang. "A man at the front desk with information about our case. The looney tunes are coming out of the woodwork early on this one."

A bland middle-aged man wearing clergy black and a clerical collar was waiting on a bench. He stood up and smiled uncertainly as Whalen approached him. "I am Chaplain





and then the sister sits on it. But what about the doctor and nurse?"

"According to the letter, the aunt assured them the dying man was talking drug-induced gibberish. There had been no murder. Tom asked me if I thought he could sue his aunt and uncle. He wants to continue his education, but how? Because he served his full sentence, he was turned out into the real world with just over a hundred dollars that he'd earned by working in the center's post office, no place to live, no job, no family to help. It's a cruel system."

Whalen said, "So he wanted to civil-sue his relatives for four years locked up unjustly. He's intelligent. Deathbed confessions are admissible in court. Whether a judge or jury believes them is another ballgame, but at least the aunt and uncle could have tried."

"Exactly. I told him to consult an attorney. My sister is a paralegal. I called her and gave Tom the name and number of a lawyer she recommended."

Whalen made a time-out sign. "You know, every three years for precisely eight minutes, my brain works quickly and well. Of course the aunt and uncle who kept the confession in a closet were our victims."

"I'm afraid so."

"Bingo," Schott muttered. "Saints with dirty underwear."

The chaplain handed over a folded sheet of paper. "The name of the lawyer. Tom said he intended to call her, but I don't know whether he did."

Whalen said, "When he talked to you about the letter, what was his mood? Angry? Full of hate?"

"Absolutely not. More like bewildered. He couldn't seem to comprehend such indifference and cruelty. And remember, lawsuit money was probably his only means of gaining a meaningful future. Now that his relatives are dead, so is his hope."

"Did he have any idea who might have written the letter?"

"No. A poser."

Whalen glanced at Schott, who nodded. "Maybe, maybe not. Thank you, chaplain. You've helped a lot."

The three men stood up. Chaplain Muller said, "There are many reasons why I don't believe Tom hurt those people, but I felt an obligation to share."

On the way back to their desks Whalen said, "What do you think? Robert writes the letter, and we have an instant suspect. If we don't come up with Thomas Hill on our own, you can bet he would have figured a way to aim us at him, although I admit there are holes in that. We can work that out with the

devil's advocate." He pointed at the paper in Schott's hand. "Who's the lawyer? Anyone who enjoyed making mincemeat out of us on a witness stand?"

Schott unfolded the paper. "Janice Benjamin. Never heard of her. She's probably civil law."

"Isn't that an oxymoron?"

When Schott finished talking to Attorney Benjamin, he said, "Well, I'll be damned."

"Eventually."

"She was about to call us. Thomas Hill is her client. She's due in court this afternoon, so she's bringing him in at four thirty to make a statement that may be germane, if that's a word, to our case."

Whalen made a thumbs up. "Good show. We may actually solve a case without leaving this building. We'll be living legends, and your mother will be so proud. I'll call downstairs and get the Thomas Hill case file. We should know it before we talk to him. Then we investigate the menu at Charlene's. It is definitely germane to our appetites."

"Is that really a word?"

"How would I know? I'm a dumb cop."

After lunch the partners met with the four detectives from General Assignment and sent them off to do an in-depth inves-

tigation into Robert Cubbison's business and personal life.

An hour later Schott flipped the Hill case file onto his desk. "Good job by our people."

Whalen lit a cigarette and stared into space for a moment. "Thomas Hill never had a prayer. The big three were standing tall waving him goodbye. *Opportunity*. He couldn't account for his whereabouts that Saturday afternoon. His father had an alibi. *Motive*. None established for the father, but the boy's was a classic. His mother physically abused him for years. Once she broke his arm and another time fractured his skull, and made him lie to the family about all the abuse. They got him to admit he hated her. *Physical evidence*. Again, nothing linking the father, but the boy's fingerprints were on the handle of the knife sticking in his mother's chest. I would have voted thumbs down, too."

"The knife sticking in his mother's chest just like the knife in Harold Cubbison's chest? Coincidence?"

"Or a pointer. If the father actually did it, he was super-slick."

Attorney Janice Benjamin was a comely forty, buxom, dark hair styled short, her average height dwarfed by the gangling young man at her side.

Thomas Hill, a lean six feet four inches tall, had the kind of boyish face liquor store clerks and bartenders hate.

The lawyer said, "Gentlemen, this is Thomas Hill, my client in a civil action. He wishes to make a statement in connection with your current murder investigation. For the record, he is here voluntarily."

"Understood," Schott said, and they sat around an interrogation room table. "Go ahead, Thomas."

The young man sat up straighter, cleared his throat, and spoke in a monotone, like a person rehearsed. "My name is Thomas Hill. Last Friday evening at approximately eight thirty I went to the home of my uncle and aunt, Harold and Irene Cubbison. They invited me in, and I visited with them for about twenty minutes, then left. When I left, they were alive and unharmed. I have no knowledge of who killed them, knowing only that I was in no way responsible for their deaths."

The lawyer said, "You might or might not have found out about Thomas's visit but he wanted to come forward. He has nothing to hide."

Whalen nodded. "Your statement is noted. Now let's drop the formality and chat. Tom, why did you go there?"

"I got this letter, and it said ..."

"We know about the letter," Schott interrupted.

The lawyer looked up in surprise. "How?"

"We'll get to that. Right now let's hear from Tom."

Lawyer Benjamin gave her client an exasperated sidelong look. "I advised Thomas to have no contact with the Cubbisons. With a lawsuit pending, a visit was ill-advised. He went anyway."

Hill shrugged. "I just had to ask them why they didn't try to help me. It turned out to be a not-so-nice visit."

"Where did you talk?"

"Just inside the living room. I guess I was lucky to get that far. When I told my aunt about the letter and that my lawyer found the two witnesses, she got purple-in-the-face furious and said they didn't have to explain themselves to anyone."

"And then?"

"Not much else. My aunt refused to talk about it, and I got mad. Okay, I called them some names. Heartless. Cruel garbage. Like that. Nothing dirty. And I told them I was going to sue their pants off. My aunt ordered me out of the house, so I left. I didn't touch them."

"What did your uncle say about all this?"

"The usual. Nothing. When I



was young, I thought my uncle was a ventriloquist. When they were together, every time someone talked to him or asked him a question my aunt would answer for him. That hadn't changed in eight years."

Whalen rolled his eyes. "Oh yes. My grandmother."

"He kept his back to us, staring out the patio door. Why would I hurt them, sir? Mrs. Benjamin said we had a real good chance of winning in court, and now I'm as dead as they are. I have no money and no future."

Janice Benjamin looked at the partners in turn. "We've been so busy discussing the visit it hasn't come up yet. He really doesn't know."

"That makes three of us," Schott said. "Doesn't know what?"

"The murders change nothing. We can still pursue the civil suit as planned."

A wide grin made Thomas Hill look even more boyish. "We can? All right! That's great. I still have a chance."

Whalen grew a thoughtful frown. "Tom, the murders don't seem to have upset you much."

Hill's grin dissolved into a frown to match Whalen's. "Why should I care? They didn't care about me. My whole family disowned me. I didn't have one visitor in eight years. That letter

was my first personal mail ever."

"Do you still have the envelope the letter came in?"

"No. I didn't think."

The lawyer opened her briefcase and removed clipped sheets of paper. "How did you know about this letter?" She handed the sheets to Whalen. "A copy. As I said, nothing to hide."

"The chaplain from the juvenile center told us." Whalen scanned the letter and slid it in front of Schott, pointing. "The padre didn't mention that. The letter suggests a lawsuit."

Hill nodded. "Sure. I never would have thought of it."

"Counselor, we'll need the original. It's a long shot, but we may get useful fingerprints from it."

"I'll send it over. I have a theory. John and Michael Hill had given their brother Martin, Thomas's father, an alibi for the time of his wife's death. If Martin's confession had been accepted, that would have meant they lied. The Hill males of that generation all died young. Martin Hill was only forty. At the time of his confession John Hill was dead, but Michael was alive and well. He's dead now, but at the time he would have faced possible serious criminal charges, especially since an innocent Thomas had been locked up for

four years due in part to Michael's perjured testimony. I believe Irene Cubbison cared more for her brother than she did for her nephew, truth, or justice. If I can prove that motivation, Thomas will win his suit."

Schott said, "Tom, we've read your case file. A motive was established for you but none for your father. If he did it, why?"

"They knew I was abused. Well, my father was just as abused, only not with beatings. Every day my mother had her evil mouth going, telling him he was worthless, useless, an undereducated nothing, a failure she would regret marrying to the day she died. She treated our dog better. What a monster."

"So if you were innocent, you knew your father did it. Did you ever ask him why he was letting you take the blame? How he could do that to his son?"

"Once, in jail. He hung his head and walked out just like he always did when my mother was beating me. Gutless wimp."

"Where are you staying?"

The lawyer said, "The Oaks Motel. I'm advancing the room and expenses against an award. Special circumstances."

"And if you lose?"

Janice Benjamin half smiled. "That goes with the territory. Civil law is Las Vegas without

the free drinks. Is Thomas free to leave? He will stay in the city."

Schott hesitated as he exchanged a meaningful look with Whalen, then said, "For now. We may talk again."

As the group left the room, Thomas Hill placed a hand on his lawyer's shoulder. "I'm glad we came. I feel better. Now let's go fire a broadside at that estate executor."

Back at their desks Whalen said, "The devil's advocate?"

Schott nodded as he read a telephone message slip. "A call from Claudia Cubbison."

"I told her brother to have her contact us when she got in from San Diego. Call and set up a meeting. She might have clues germane to our investigation."

"Stop that." Schott tapped in a number and listened for a time before uttering several sentences and hanging up. "Robert's apartment. First time I ever got a recorded death notice on an answering machine. Wake last night and tonight. Funeral tomorrow at two o'clock. I said we would be there at ten in the morning."

"Good. The wake will be a mob scene." Whalen loosened his tie and leaned back. "Take your pick."

Schott thought about that. "Okay. Satan, meet Thomas







bit of physical evidence against him. One out of the big three won't do it. The D.A. would laugh at us, or maybe cry. We need much more. When we finish, you go home to your family, and I'll stop by night court and get a warrant to search Hill's room on the really off chance you're right and he was careless. Always cover all the bases. Who said that?"

"Babe Ruth?"

"Shame on you. My turn. Robert Cubbison. For this scenario he had a motive we don't know yet and a plan. He knew about the confession from his parents. He finds out when Hill is being released and writes the letter. An instant motive. Hate. Friday night Robert leaves the club after the first set and goes to see his parents, the dutiful son with gloves in his pocket. They visit in the family room. Imagine Robert's joyous surprise when he hears that Hill just left, hoping his cousin left a bonus of evidence of his presence. In time Robert goes into the kitchen for a drink of water, a beer, whatever. It's all right, he belongs. He knows where the knife set is and quietly gets one, using a handkerchief or like that. That explains no sign of ransacking. Hill wouldn't have bothered to close drawers. Robert hides the knife on his person and waits for one parent to leave the room. A

trip to the bathroom. That was vital to his plan. He turns his back, slips on the gloves, stabs the parent who stayed, and ambushes the other when he or she returns. One at a time, surprise attacks, no struggles. Leaves the knife in his father's chest like Hill's mother. He knows he can't tell us Hill had been there. He shouldn't know that, so he turns off the lights, leaving nothing to look unusual during the day. He doesn't want the bodies found too soon so the time of death is iffy and extended, making a Hill alibi harder to establish. He goes home, does the shower, clean clothes, dispose of the bloody ones routine, then back to the club to mingle and be seen. He finds the bodies Sunday and in time sets us after Hill, making sure we know about the confession and lack of action on same. I think right after the funeral he would have suddenly remembered Hill. Now he doesn't have to bother. Lucky Robert. I'll also get a warrant so forensics can go over his car. If I'm right, he drove home wearing bloody clothing. Lucky is what we might get. So?"

"First, the letter suggested legal action, giving Hill good reason at the time to want his relatives alive and well. Seems like cross-purposes."

"I agree, but it was a way to get Hill to tell a lawyer about it.

That way Hill couldn't deny knowledge of the letter like he'd never received it. As it turned out, we also have Chaplain-Muller to confirm."

"I can't buy it. The letter was too strong a motive to keep his aunt and uncle alive with check-book in hand, period. It was obvious Hill didn't know he could still sue if they were dead."

"Okay, it's a stretch, but who else could have done the letter and why?"

"I know. But suppose Hill is released and immediately goes far far away to live, like maybe Pago Pago? That would defeat Robert's plan big time."

"Robert had to chance that. If Hill leaves, he's in the clear, but we still have no evidence against Robert, who would insist on his intruder. And remember, if Hill does get a lawyer and they sue, he stays here in the city, on hand as a suspect."

Schott raised his hands in surrender. "It sits damned uneasy, but I suppose we have to like Robert and hope we get lucky with his auto. Have we written off an intruder?"

"I have. If someone forced his way in, there would have been the usual signs or at least a burglary. Robert couldn't make it look like a thief and have us favor Hill."

Schott pushed his notes together and slid them inside a

folder. "You know, somebody, and I don't know who, said something, and I don't know what, that's bothering me. My old friend the uneasy rat is gnawing at my insides again."

"Odd. Me too. I wonder if we're tuned to the same channel, although I have no gnawing. I don't allow rodents inside this shrine to clean living."

At eight o'clock Wednesday morning Whalen greeted Schott with the news that he had found nothing incriminating in Thomas Hill's motel room; then the partners met with the four detectives who were investigating Robert Cubbison. After an afternoon of work only two of them had information to offer. One claimed Robert's business was solvent and growing yearly. The second man said, "He's got an expensive hobby he could be hard pressed to afford. Records."

Whalen's eyebrows shot up. "Records?"

"Jazz records. The old seventy-eights. He's a collector. In mint condition they're worth a lot. Six weeks ago his father cosigned a bank loan for thirty-five thousand dollars. Robert bought a collection of every seventy-eight made by a Billie Holiday, whoever he is."

Whalen chuckled. "She. I saw the movie. It's a start."

\*



Claudia Cubbison watched the partners looking back and forth from her to her brother. Under different circumstances she might have laughed, but now her mouth only turned up slightly at the corners. "Yes, we're twins."

The Cubbison siblings looked as much alike as twins of opposite sexes could look. Of medium height and tending toward plump, their hazel eyes were set in round faces topped by light brown hair.

The partners had agreed on a strategy that routinely did not overlook Claudia Cubbison. Schott said, "Our condolences, Miss Cubbison. We know this is a bad time."

Claudia's eyes were red-rimmed and puffy, her voice subdued. "I understand."

Robert was staring out a window at approaching storm-clouds. Without turning he said, "Anything new?"

"No," Whalen replied. "By the way, Robert, that club owner thinks you play fine piano. Good enough to be a professional. Did you ever consider it?"

"When I was younger, but my folks knocked that nonsense out of my head." Robert turned to face the room. "Success in music, particularly jazz, is too problematical, the life nomadic. An education, a decent profession,

and roots in the community are what responsible people aspire to, so I did just that. My parents did me a favor." He paused, then, added, "I suppose. At least I didn't embarrass them." He turned quickly to the window again.

Claudia looked in her brother's direction. Her face was sad. "Bobby, a few weeks ago, for the first time in years, I played those tapes we made. What good memories." She sat facing the partners. "When we were in college, we made tapes. Jazz. Bobby played, and I sang. The great tunes. It was such fun then. We even had a few jobs." Her sigh was eloquent.

"Were you good, too?"

"Some said I had the feel and flair of Ella. I only know I loved to sing."

"What do you do in San Diego?"

"I'm an attorney with the county public defender's office. I also had responsibility drilled into me."

"Why San Diego?"

"Oh, to try my wings after twenty-six years at home. Change of climate. Something new."

The partners saw Robert give his sister a quick, bemused glance over his shoulder. Whalen looked at Schott, who nodded once. Whalen said, "Thomas Hill."



Claudia's eyes opened wide. She stared, her color fading.

Robert turned. "Our cousin? What about him? He's in jail."

"He was released a week ago yesterday. Which of you wrote him a letter recently?"

Too quickly Robert said, "That's silly. God, I haven't thought about him in years. Do you think he was involved in what happened?"

"Do you think he could have been involved?"

Robert's surprising reply was an emphatic, "Hell, no. I mean why?"

"Why would we write him?" Claudia's voice was barely above a whisper. "Do you know what he did to his mother?"

Schott said, "We know his record. You both knew about your Uncle Martin's deathbed confession, right?"

Claudia nodded. Robert shrugged an affirmative.

"The letter Thomas Hill received suggested he sue your parents for not revealing the confession to the authorities."

Robert made a wry face. "Being sued would have crucified my mother. She defined the word parsimonious. Taking money away from her would have caused a reaction that registered on the Richter scale. Well, it's too late now. Tom can forget it."

"He can still sue," Claudia said quietly.

"How can he sue dead people?"

"He will now sue me. That's the legal procedure. Sue the executor who is responsible for all debts against the estate."

Schott looked puzzled, then frowned and shook his head once.

Whalen said, "Let's not play games. Who else knew about the confession?"

Robert hesitated, then threw up his hands and counted on his fingers. "What the hell. Uncle Mike, but he's been dead a year. I suppose Mike's wife Kitty, but she remarried and lives in Oregon. That doctor and nurse. Our parents. Us. Okay, that's it and I know what you're going to say."

"Of course," Whalen agreed. "We can eliminate your aunt, the doctor, and the nurse. Your parents would never have written the letter. That leaves one of you." Claudia opened her mouth to speak, but Whalen, as planned, got there first with the killer shot. "Friday night Thomas Hill went to your parents' house, and they let him in."

Robert made a strangling sound deep in his throat, but the partners' attention was drawn to Claudia's reaction to the statement. Her mouth fell open, her eyes blinked rapidly.

Suddenly she slapped a hand over her mouth, lurched up, and hurried out of the room. A door slammed, and they heard her being very sick.

"I hope she's in the bathroom," Robert mumbled to himself.

In time the retching stopped, and sounds of Claudia sobbing drifted to them. Whalen said, "Your sister obviously wrote the letter, Robert, and now feels responsible for what happened, perhaps for the wrong reason. Why did she do it? We saw the look you gave her when she was talking about San Diego. It wasn't a change of climate that took her so far away, it was getting away from your parents. She has regrets and resentment, right? Her singing and your parents' overbearing attitude? She wanted to hurt them. Sue because all your Hill uncles are dead."

"I won't answer for her."

"When did she tell you about the letter?"

"What makes you think she did?"

"Come on, Robert, you knew. Why did you lie about your alibi? You only played at that club until nine thirty."

"Did I say . . . I was confused. My God, I had just found my parents murdered. I meant I played and stayed at the club until closing. I didn't try to fool you. You think I could have

killed my parents? That's ludicrous."

"You don't carry around the same resentment and regrets? You still play when you can. The love of music surely never left you. And your record collection."

"How . . ." Robert sat down and stared at the carpet. "Whatever I feel isn't powerful enough to cause me to kill. This is monstrous. What about Tom Hill?"

"He thought he needed your parents alive to sue," Whalen said. "Why didn't your parents act on the confession? When Tom Hill asked your mother why, she said they didn't have to explain their actions to anyone. Definitely evasive."

Robert looked up. "Who told you that? Tom may resent the confession's not being made public, but he knows why my parents would never do that. He wouldn't ask."

"Explain."

Robert stood up and paced. "Lord, you don't know, do you? My parents kept the confession quiet because it was a phony and Martin had lost it. Martin didn't kill his wife, Thomas did. The right person was locked up."

"Please sit down and explain."

Robert did as he was asked. "Look, four years ago Martin's doctors gave him three months to live. Turned out he lasted only five weeks. Martin had discovered that deathbed confes-

ations can be used in court. He went to warn Uncle Mike that he was going to confess to the murder on his deathbed. He said that four years earlier Tom had done him a huge favor. He hated that awful woman as much as Tom did. He said he could now repay the favor, do something good for his son for the first time. Mike couldn't believe what he was hearing. As Martin's alibi, Mike knew that he himself could go to jail. And he was innocent, his testimony the truth. Imminent death had apparently made Martin spacey. He said he didn't care. He said he had already been out to see Tom and told him what to expect. It was a way for him to die in peace."

"Tom said he never had a visitor in eight years."

"Martin claimed he went out there. Mike was frantic, so he went to my mother. She was the oldest and usually had influence with her brothers. She tried to talk Martin out of his lunacy, but he wouldn't budge. But Martin wasn't so far gone that he didn't realize confessing to my parents would be useless, so he waited until that doctor and nurse were present. He was actually confessing to them. Somehow my mother smoothed it over with them, and Martin never knew." Robert suddenly looked horrified. "Oh my God, the letter. When nothing hap-

pened, Tom probably thought his father had lost his nerve. Then the letter told him the opposite. Oh, Claudia. She never intended . . ." Robert covered his eyes.

Schott leaned over and whispered in Whalen's ear. "Oscar time? And the envelope, please."

Whalen wiggled his eyebrows.

Claudia came back into the room clutching a box of tissues. Her face was swollen, her nose and eyes a matching crimson. She sat down heavily, avoiding looking at the partners. The room was silent for a long minute before she said, "Go ahead. Ask. I wrote the letter, but I never meant . . ." Her voice faded.

Schott said, "When did you tell Robert about it?"

"I sent him a copy with a note of explanation the day I sent it."

"I never denied it." Robert waved his hands. "So I knew. That doesn't prove anything except I liked the idea."

"And maybe took advantage of it." Schott turned to Claudia. "It was the singing, right?"

Claudia appeared not to have heard Schott's innuendo. She gazed at a far corner of the ceiling, and when she spoke, her voice was low and dreamy. "I wanted it so much. You know, dream-killing should be a first class felony. Really. Murder



one. No one has the right to impose their will and kill a dream; the spirit. Dream killers should be sentenced harshly, but the ironic reality is it's those whose dreams are slaughtered who are sentenced. Oh yes, sentenced to die the most horrible death there is. We hear about deaths and think what a horrible way to die. People burn, fall off tall buildings, linger with a disease. Not nice ways to die. But the most hideous death is to have to go to your grave saying I wish I had and I wonder what would have happened if." Claudia shivered.

Whalen said, "You're young. It's not too late."

"Oh but it is. There's a magical time when the spirit is dauntless and confidence reigns. You believe totally in yourself, and you're willing to take on the world. But that magical time comes only once. After that the spirit becomes flaccid, and tentativeness rules supreme. Believe me, I know."

"So you decided to avenge yourself on your parents by writing the letter."

"I suppose avenge is the right word. I knew losing a civil suit involving cash would figuratively destroy my mother and she would then make my father's life miserable. I never expected or wanted them to be killed. Tom Hill did it, right?" Claudia

reached for a tissue as she quietly began to cry.

"Frankly, we don't know who did it yet. Tom Hill had no motive because he believed he needed your parents alive to sue."

Schott said, "Say that again."

Whalen repeated himself. Schott squeezed his eyes shut for a moment, then opened them. "Nothing."

Whalen asked Claudia how long she would be in the city.

"Until the weekend. As executor I have legalities to take care of in the next two days, and then I'll spend the weekend with Bobby."

The partners stood up. As Whalen said, "We'll be in touch," there was a knock on the front door.

Robert answered, and a man in a windbreaker carrying a large attaché case asked for Detective Whalen. When Whalen got to the door, he slid a folded document out of an inside pocket and handed it to Robert. "This gentleman is from the forensic lab. That's a warrant to examine your car. Please go with him and open your vehicle, thank you very much."

The partners spent the rest of Wednesday going through the motions because they had no leads. The employees of the jazz club could neither confirm nor



deny Robert's presence all Friday night.

The Homicide group met on Thursday morning instead of Friday because Captain Noblitt was taking a long weekend. When it was their turn to speak, the partners brought the group up to date on their case.

"You mean this Hill character can still sue even though those people are dead?"

Whalen nodded.

"That's interesting, but then that's civil law and we don't deal with that much in Homicide."

"He now sues the estate executor," Whalen said.

Schott slapped the table so hard most of the men sitting around it jumped. "That's it. That's the gnawing. None of you knew Hill could still sue even though his relatives were dead. After we told you, did any of you know the estate executor would be the person sued?" A cluster of shaking heads. "Frank and I didn't know. Robert Cubbison didn't know. His sister knew because she's a lawyer. But Hill's lawyer told him for the first time in our presence that they could still sue and that's exactly all she said. They could still sue. But dammit, Thomas Hill knew it was the estate executor who would be the target. When they were leaving, Hill said something about firing a broadside at the estate executor. He knew

the procedure. He knew all along he could sue after his relatives were dead." Schott pointed at his partner. "And that phantom visit. Excuse me, captain. I have to make a call."

"Who to?" Whalen asked.

"Chaplain Muller." Schott left.

"Sounds on the thin side," the captain said

"I know," Whalen agreed. "And we still have the problem with Hill's losing his cool and barging around looking for a knife with the victims waiting patiently for him to find one."

"A thought. If Hill's intention all along was to attack them, maybe he didn't have to look until after the fact. Misdirection and he could have taken his time. Been careful. We had a case just last year. Drug dealer A, using his favorite blade, stabbed drug dealer B to death. Somehow drug dealer A had gained possession of an ornate knife known to belong to drug dealer C, and that knife was left sticking in the corpse. Naturally we favored drug dealer C for the killing until the coroner pointed out that the knife stuck in the victim was not the knife that had made the other fourteen stab wounds. Like I said, a thought."

"And a good one," Whalen said. "But Hill and the victims were in the living room, which



is logical, and there was no sign of an attack there. They would all have to have been in the family room and Hill, with his own knife, waiting for one of them to leave the room, like we think the son might have done and ... *of course! Damn, damn, damn!* Francis John Whalen, you are a big dummy. That's it. That's what I couldn't remember."

Schott returned in time to say, "I heard you outside. Are you passing a kidney stone? Come on. We're going to the juvenile center. The padre is setting us up."

"Leo, I remember. The patio door."

"The what?"

"I'll explain on the way."

Chaplain Muller had the two men to be interviewed waiting in his small office. It took only forty-five minutes to draw a rough sketch. At one point Schott said, "I think Robert Cubbison was right on the money," and Whalen agreed with a decisive nod. Before they left the center, Whalen called Attorney Benjamin, and on the ride back to headquarters the partners decided on a plan.

"We're not home free," Whalen offered. "With the total lack of physical evidence it's going to be tricky."

Schott said, "Tricky we can be, and please, none of that silly

good cop, bad cop stuff, all right?"

"No way. We both run with the ball, firm but unfair."

A young uniformed officer was standing in the corner of the interrogation room, arms folded across his chest, an empty brown paper sack in one hand.

Attorney Benjamin said, "As before, we have nothing to hide. Thomas is willing to cooperate in every way."

"We'll see," Whalen said, leading off as planned. "Tom, when I searched your room, I noticed you didn't have many clothes. Not many at all."

Hill said, "The center couldn't buy many. Mrs. Benjamin is going to buy me a suit for court."

"I didn't see any shoes in the room except the pair of sneakers you were wearing. The pair you're wearing now."

"Sure. I have only one pair."

"So you couldn't throw them away. Will you please take them off." Whalen looked at the uniformed officer, who stepped over to Hill and snapped open the paper sack, holding it out. "Put your shoes in the bag, please."

"What is this?" Mrs. Benjamin demanded.

"We want your client's shoes. One way or the other we get them, and you know it."

The attorney stared into Whalen's steady gaze for a moment,

then said, "Give them your shoes, Thomas."

Hill slipped off his sneakers and dropped them into the sack. The officer rolled the top and left the room.

"Where is he taking them?" Hill asked.

"To the forensics lab. The darndest things, like blood, hide in cracks and crevices in sneakers. You would be amazed."

"Detective, is my client a suspect?"

Schott took over. "You bet he is. Your client is quite an actor and a bad liar. He even fooled you."

Attorney Benjamin looked thoughtful and didn't reply.

Schott said, "You didn't know you could sue after your aunt and uncle were dead, did you, Tom?"

"Not until Mrs. Benjamin told me."

"Then how did you know the legal procedure was to sue the estate executor? Mrs. Benjamin didn't mention it, but that's what you said leaving this very room. Only a lawyer would know that, or someone who had made it his business. You knew all along you could still sue, and we know how."

"No, I didn't."

Attorney Benjamin turned to stare at her client, small creases growing between her eyebrows.

Whalen said, "You told us you

never had a visitor during your eight years at the center."

"That's right."

"That's a damned lie," Schott said. "It's on the computer. Four and a half weeks before your father died, he visited you."

"I forgot."

"One visitor in eight years and you forgot. And such an important visit. Your father told you he was going to confess to your crime on his deathbed. Do you a favor and get you out."

"That's crazy."

"We talked to the captain of guards. After your father's visit you were in high spirits, telling your friends you wouldn't be there much longer. You were going outside; thanks to your father."

Hill studied the tabletop.

"Two months passed, and nothing happened. You went into an obvious state of depression. The captain jokingly asked you one time why you were still there. You said once a gutless wimp always a gutless wimp. That's what you called your father to us. You thought he'd lost his nerve, right?"

Hill remained silent.

"Then you got that letter. You were enraged. We also talked to the center librarian." Schott turned to the attorney. "He keeps a basic set of law books so visiting attorneys can have quick reference." Back to Hill.



"The last three weeks you were there you were into those law books, looking up civil suits as suggested by the letter. And lo and behold, you found out about estate suing in case of death. Right up your alley. Now you could show your aunt and uncle who they had fooled with."

"No," Hill murmured.

Whalen said, "You went there that night with a knife and every intention of killing them. You said you talked just inside the living room."

"That's right."

"And your uncle didn't say a word. Kept his back to you, staring out the patio door. From the living room you have to go through the dining room down a short hall and turn left to get to the family room. You can't see the family room or patio door from the living room. You were all in the family room."

"We were where I told you."

"You killed them one at a time and left a kitchen knife in your uncle to fool us. You turned off all the lights so there was less chance of your being seen leaving. You disposed of your bloody clothes and the knife, but you couldn't throw away your only pair of shoes."

Attorney Benjamin said, "So far all I've heard is supposition. Do you have any proof my client committed the crimes?"

As Whalen was about to reply,

the door opened and a detective motioned to Whalen, who got up and left the room. Nobody spoke for the two minutes he was gone.

Whalen returned and sat down, looking at Mrs. Benjamin. "The forensic lab." He turned to Hill, and they stared at each other for a moment, a look of disgust warping Whalen's smooth features. Finally he said, "Trick or treat, Hill."

The young man's fists slowly clenched, his lanky body tense. Suddenly he jumped up and ran to the door, opening it to face a uniformed officer larger than he. The officer simply walked into the room, forcing Hill before him, then closed the door and leaned his back against it.

Schott said, "Sit down, Hill. You just turned into a pumpkin."

Hill sat and placed his still-clenched fists on the table. He pressed his forehead against his fists, and the partners thought he might be crying until he looked up, a look of evil distorting his youthful face. "They deserved it," he rasped. "They deserved it. They hated her as much as I did. I did everyone a favor. My father couldn't be hurt. They should have helped me. They were rotten, filthy . . ." He laid his forehead on his fists again and now he cried.

Attorney Benjamin said, "I

don't do criminal law, Thomas, but I can recommend a good lawyer."

Whalen said, "We'll get a stenographer, and you can make a formal statement, Hill. Do it now, and it will help you in the long run. Your lawyer will confirm that."

On the way out Schott mut-

tered to the uniform, "Watch him."

Outside Whalen said, "Good job, Stanley," and Schott said, "Thank you, Ollie. When do you think we'll hear from forensics?"

"Probably not until tomorrow. With all the devious people running around, that's a busy place."

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## SOLUTION TO THE JANUARY "UNSOLVED":

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Dan Mason, the carpenter, stole the diamonds.

| SUSPECT       | PROFESSION | RESIDENCE         | TIE     |
|---------------|------------|-------------------|---------|
| Art Farmer    | postman    | Rose Road         | green   |
| Dan Mason     | carpenter  | Aster Avenue      | red     |
| Gus Barber    | mason      | Peony Place       | blue    |
| Hal Letterman | teller     | Begonia Boulevard | floral  |
| Pat Teller    | judge      | Dahlia Circle     | tan     |
| Sam Carpenter | barber     | Lilac Lane        | brown   |
| Vic Judge     | farmer     | Wisteria Way      | striped |

# UNSOLVED

by  
Robert Kesling

*Unsolved at present, that is, but can you work it out?  
The answer will appear in the March issue.*

In five farflung ports, five merchant vessels—*Lovely Laura*, *Merry Marie*, *Naughty Nancy*, *Obliging Ophelia*, and *Pretty Paula*—were loaded with cargoes of gold, silver, pearls, rubies, and emeralds. The crews set sail with great trepidation, for the seas were scoured by five pirate ships—*Furious*, *Ghastly*, *Horrible*, *Infamous*, and *Jealousy*—each under the command of its notorious and dreaded captain. Alas, each merchant vessel was captured by one of the pirate ships and its cargo seized. Each evil pirate crew buried its booty on its own secret island, the location known only to themselves.

1. Awful Aubert, Butcher Bones, and Cutlass Cuthbert are (not necessarily in order) the pirate captains who captured the *Lovely Laura*, sailed aboard the *Jealousy*, and buried ill-gotten gains on Vulture Island.
2. The pirates on the *Furious*, *Ghastly*, and *Horrible* include the cutthroats of Dagger Dan, those who captured the *Pretty Paula*, and the crew that got the gold.
3. The *Merry Marie*, *Naughty Nancy*, and *Obliging Ophelia* include the merchant vessels captured by Awful Aubert, the one overtaken by the *Ghastly*, and the one laden with rubies.
4. The rubies were not buried on Underhand Island.
5. Silver, pearls, and emeralds were the treasures captured by Evil Ebert, the captain of the *Infamous*, and the pirate who buried his plunder on Witch Island.
6. Neither Evil Ebert nor the captain of the *Horrible* knew the location of Treachery Island.
7. Neither the pearls nor the treasure aboard the *Merry Marie* was captured by Cutlass Cuthbert.
8. The captain of the *Ghastly* did not know about Witch Island.
9. On Skull, Treachery, and Underhand islands now lie buried the treasure captured by Butcher Bones, the one carried by the *Obliging Ophelia*, and the emeralds.

*Can you tell where each of the treasures lies buried?*

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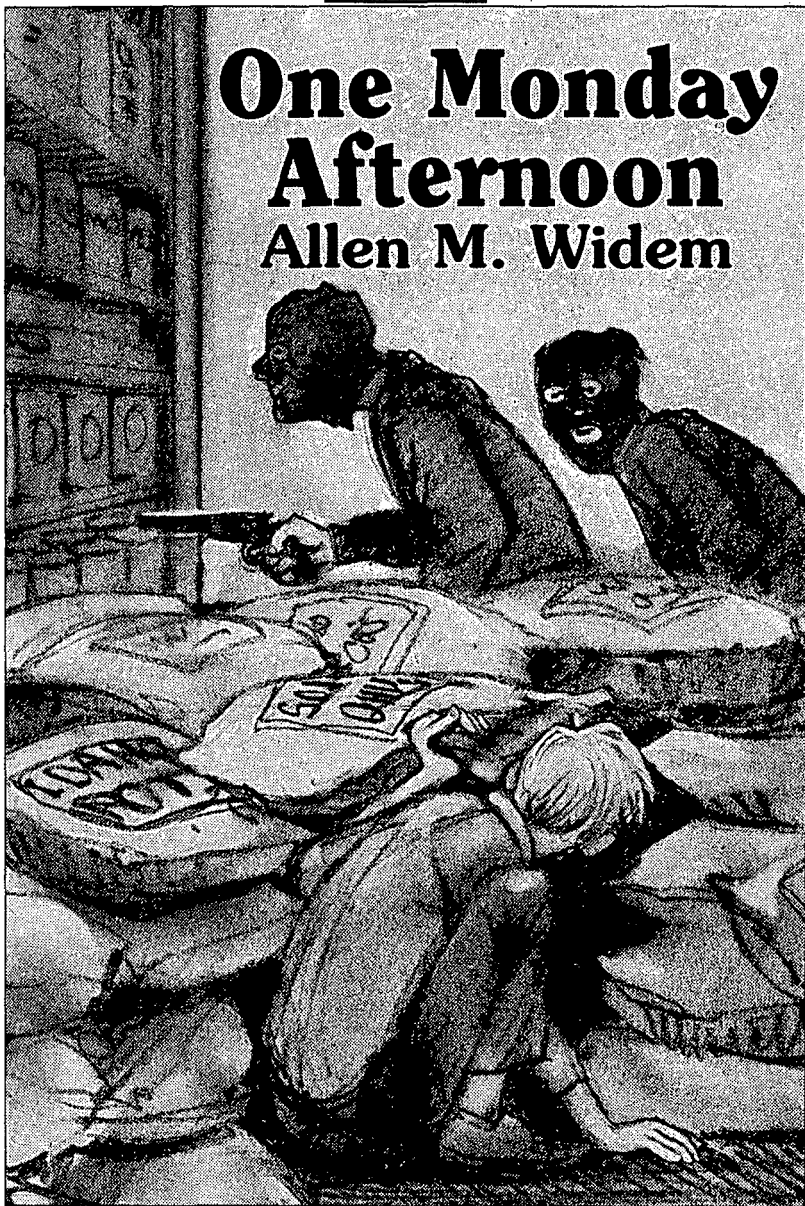
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# One Monday Afternoon

Allen M. Widem

# Allen M. Widem



*Alfred Hitchcock Mystery Magazine 2/96*

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**Y**ou'd never know, not really, that my Uncle Curtis—he's only older than me by fourteen months, and that's because he's the baby of all the grownup members in the family—used to play basketball at Jeffrey Phillips High; my Uncle Curtis even topped the field in ice-skating competitions at the town pond a couple of winters in a row. I suppose he's a little flabby, even he admits that, and he doesn't keep the regular hours he used to at his grocery store, either. That's because he likes watching the late movies on the tube, to early in the morning.

I have to go ahead and tell you all that because, well, here I am, already in my early twenties, not a kid any more, and I'm not *that* sure of what I'm going to be doing when I finally get through with college. I go to the junior college over in Pearson Township, down the road a hop, skip, and a jump as my Uncle Curtis says. And, well, afternoons, weekends, there I am, working for my uncle. He likes having me around. He's always saying that. I get to sweep up, keep the storage room looking up to par. Kind of stuff my uncle looks forward to having somebody else doing all the time.

Now, my mom, Curtis's big sister Carole, *she's* tried, really tried, to get Curtis to change his obviously lazy habits, especially watching the late movies on the boob tube, only my uncle's not as easy to change as somebody might think. I mean, he's *proud*. That trophy he won in his senior year in high school as the best forward in *any* basketball team for quite a few miles, it's still on the front counter at the store. *Still*.

I wouldn't say much about my uncle in a downbeat sort of way, not really, if I didn't also think he's got a lot of stuff upstairs. I mean, that brain works vroom-vroom-vroom. You ask him who Humphrey Bogart walked away with on the airfield after Ingrid Bergman and Paul Henreid left on the plane in *Casablanca*, and Curtis, he's right there. Claude Raines. That's how zip-zip-zip the mind works for Curtis.

My mom *and* my dad, too, they've pleaded with Curtis to clean up the act. Like, expand the store, put in a lot of stuff the super-dooper markets flourish with, just over in Pearson Town, and Curtis, *he* sits in back of the counter munching on a candy bar—he *loves* chocolate, my Uncle Curtis—and says when it's time to break out the walls, as he says, that'll be when business warrants it. Talk about brainpower! He comes in with the right word at the right time. Warrant. You don't hear *that* much in a grocery store. But on the late-night boob tube, well, that's something else again.

You'd think I'm a regular rootin' and tootin' Chamber of Commerce for my Uncle Curtis. In a way I am because despite his outwardly lazy countenance (*another* word my Uncle Curtis has tossed at me; he loves late-night television) his brain's going. Ask him how much the twenty-four-ounce cereal was selling for, say, six, nine months ago, Curtis'll have the answer. Right on the money, too.

But the thing that really got me boosting Curtis, and in front of my mom and dad, too, was what happened a week ago last Monday. You know how Mondays are in a small-town grocery store. S-l-o-w. Stop by anytime. You'll find out.

I'd dropped my books off at the house and gone over to my uncle's place on my bike. I left it in the storage room. That's in the back. Curtis doesn't like to see my bike out front. So I leave it in the storage room. After all, it's *his* business.

I was stocking soup. Aisle one, if you please. (Even though the store's not *that* big, my uncle likes to label the three aisles—count 'em, t-h-r-e-e!—he's got for staple goods.) I was putting tomato soup on the bottom shelf.

I heard the shot the same time as my Uncle Curtis. He was standing at the counter. Nobody else was in the place. It was Monday, a real ho-hum kind of day. We looked at each other, me getting up from where I'd been hunkered down, and whammo! another shot rang out. Then a shout and a screech of brakes and then silence. Complete silence, as only our town on a Monday afternoon can provide.

My uncle and I rushed to the front door. It's a hop, skip, and a jump from anywhere in that store, believe me. We looked out, and there on Main Street it's Constable Norman Peters in his car pulling up at the Thompson Bank across the street, and there's J. R. Thompson, the big honcho of the bank, standing and gesturing to Constable Peters, and Curtis and I and a bunch of other people—at least eight, and that's something in our town on a sleepy Monday afternoon, you got to believe me—rushed over, and we learned that two guys had come in and gone out with a bunch of money bills, courtesy of the Thompson Bank.

Now, Constable Peters and my Uncle Curtis are great good buddies; they went to high school together, even played basketball together, although the constable, he got interested in Polly, that's his wife now, and lost interest in basketball, which is understandable because, well, Polly, she's a knockout. Really.

"Norm, this is the first time anything like this has ever hap-

pened," Mr. Thompson muttered. (I know he muttered because I was standing right there.)

My uncle and I walked back to the store talking about this first-time-ever thing happening right here in town, and pretty soon we got busy. At least *I* did. I went on stocking tomato soup, and Curtis, he went in back of the counter and later he called over something about this being a very slow afternoon. For the store, anyway.

Pretty soon it *got* busy, people on their way home from work in the city (just twenty miles down the road, really, that's all), and Curtis had me in back of the counter, too, toting up, checking out, that kind of thing, and everybody talked about the bank robbery, a brand-new occurrence for a town like ours. Brand-new.

Just before closing, I had to take some empty cartons out to the dumpster in back, and when I got out there, I found a lot of trash tossed on the ground, which was not unexpected, really, because there's a barber shop next door, and a lawyers' office on the other side—couple of guys from the city opened a branch, converting a former private residence into an office—and I picked up the newspapers and other stuff and put it all into the dumpster. I knew Curtis would appreciate that. He doesn't like clutter. Not him.

I walked back inside, getting ready to help Curtis close up, and I come into the storage room and heard talking, and I wondered if it was Curtis talking to himself, only he's never done that, and just before I stepped into the store itself I saw these two guys standing there, masks on their faces and a pistol in one guy's hand. I swallowed hard and slunk over to the side, out of sight. I peeked out and waited.

"*All* the dough in the register, Fatso," the guy with the gun snapped.

"That's all there is," Curtis said. He didn't sound rattled, not Curtis.

"*Seventy-two dollars!*" the other guy snarled. "Your little friends across the street had more!"

"You the bank robbers?" That was Curtis talking, astonishment in his voice. Really. Astonishment.

The guy with the gun slammed the weapon into Curtis's face then, the vicious blow sending Curtis whammo! down to the floor, and the two guys, *greedy*, that's what they were, *real greedy*, shoved Curtis out of their way and started emptying the drawers under the counter.

I stumbled then. Got so rattled, holdup guys right there, just feet

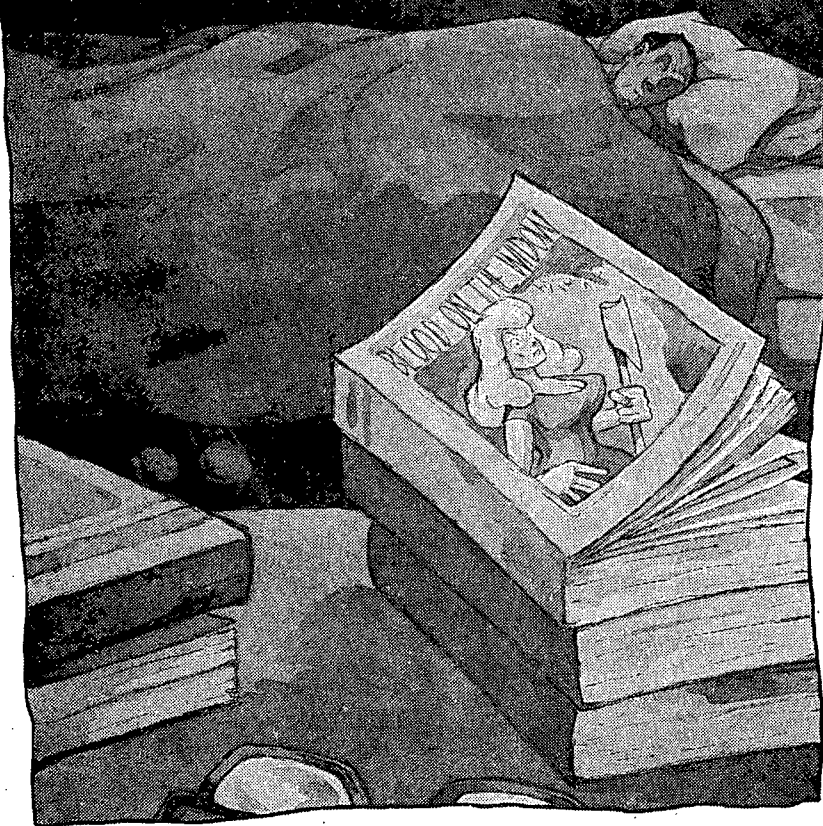
away, well, what *do* you do *but* get rattled? And the two guys stopped what they were doing and came through the open door to the storage room, and I ducked down behind the stacks of potatoes Curtis keeps in back, I really squirmed down, you couldn't see me if you tried, really, and I heard the two guys grumbling and growling to each other, turning cartons over and everything, and finally one guy tells the other guy they'd better get themselves out of there while the getting out was good and they went out of the storage room and into the store and all of a sudden they're down, down on the floor groping and Curtis is yelling and shouting for me to grab the pistol, grab the pistol, and I jumped up and ran and there were these two men, sliding around, really sliding around, it looked like chocolate syrup all over, really, chocolate syrup, and I grabbed the pistol and said, "Hold it!" Just like in the movies. Really.

Constable Norman Peters told me I'd acted very calmly when it all happened and I didn't say a word. My Uncle Curtis, he'd told Constable Peters I'd acted very calmly. And *I* had to go ahead and tell the constable that Curtis, Curtis opening those cans of chocolate syrup and spreading the contents all around, even with that bump on his head, well, *that* was right out of the movies. Right out. Can opener, no noise. Bump on head. Get can opener. Open. Spread. Spread it thick and heavy. Bogart couldn't have done it better. Not even Bogart.



# Realistic Novel Library

## Dan Crawford





“Do you really think anybody will pay five dollars for an old paperback called *Marijuana Mob*?”

“Ayeh,” said Henry. What Henry meant by ayeh was, “Don’t be silly. I just haul them home, look them up in price guides, and wrap them in plastic because I can’t stand having evenings free.”

Jody knew it, too. She sniffed and moved back to the boxes to pull out shiny copies of the latest hardbacks by Alison Lurie and Barbara Kingsolver. Henry wrinkled his nose and moved around to the other end of the row of boxes. One of the drawbacks of volunteering for this book fair was the “assistance” of people who knew everything about books because they subscribed to the *New York Times Book Review*.

Still, there was always the joy of unloading the boxes of books donated by friends and associates of the library. Coming in every day to find another box of unknown gifts made for three hundred Christmases a year.

Henry raised the flaps on a broad cardboard box. Finding neat stacks of paperbacks, he took it by those flaps and hauled it behind the front table to sort it, and to keep the contents out of Jody’s clutches. She had no feel for books, just tossing them onto stacks by category. Any kind of treasure could be waiting and she wouldn’t know a Bantam of Los Angeles from last week’s three-hanky romance.

The first armful he pulled out suggested she would have found no great challenge here. These were the things he saw every week: Pär Lagerkvist, Napoleon Hill, Albert Camus, Alistair MacLean, Henrik Ibsen . . .

“Ah!”

From under peeling plastic stared a wide-eyed blonde in a glowing dress that was cut not so much low as far, way out on improbably jutting breasts. A spotlighted axe hung from her left hand. It was just the kind of thing Jody would stare at, puzzled, and say, “But why would anybody want that?”

For Henry, though, it was enough to forgive the donor for one more Napoleon Hill. He set this treasure on a stack of possibles, which included a trio of Signets and a Ballantine Adult Fantasy. Then, dispersing Pär Lagerkvist and Albert Camus to their respective shelves, he hurried back to the box in search of further goodies.

At night he carried the paperbacks home to be studied against the price guides, judged as to condition, and, if circumstances warrant-

ed it, packaged in plastic for the Collectibles table. Tonight none of the Signets or Ballantines pleased either Hancer or Warren; neither price guide had rated any of Henry's bagful any higher than an antique piece of semiporn called *That Girl from Boston*. Henry had, as always, saved the best for last, though. He had never heard of the Realistic Novel Library, but any company that would print as its #266 an obvious classic like *Blood on the Widow* had to be worthwhile. Unless, of course, they had started numbering with #266.

A minute later he closed the price guides. Perhaps they'd ended with #266 as well. The red-clad blonde with her axe didn't show up at all, any more than the Realistic Novel Library.

He smiled down on *Blood on the Widow*. Now he could write to Hancer and Warren with data on this unrecorded volume. Not only would he thus contribute to the sum of bibliographic knowledge, but he would get his name printed in the next edition of the guides. Having his name in that list was important; it meant he could snarl at Jody and the others, "Don't tell *me* how to handle paperbacks! See my name right here among contributors of data?"

For that he needed the full name and address of the publisher of *Blood on the Widow*; this could be the work of some famous book-monger who kept changing company names to keep ahead of the postal authorities. As he held the cover open, he found the book sitting wrong, as though lopsided. It was one of the things he'd tried to explain to Jody when she asked that he just write down ways to recognize a collectible book. The feel had to be learned through experience.

Some kind of insert was dividing the book in the middle, adding weight. *Blood on the Widow* was too early for the cigarette ads of the seventies or the correspondence course ads of the sixties; this had to be a thick bookmark. But when he tugged at the paper, it wouldn't come free.

So he set *Blood on the Widow* down on one knee and gently held the volume open with one hand as he unfolded the obstruction, taking care not to let any of the creases pull apart.

He whistled. It was a poster version of the cover. The woman with the axe was down in the right-hand corner, but the rest of the poster was occupied by the creature egging her on. The monster was as impressive and as decade-specific in his way as the woman was in hers, a muscular lizard-man straight out of the fifties.

This was definitely worthy of Hancer and Warren. Henry measured the poster and then described the monster as well, growing

uncharacteristically poetic as he set out the archaic charm of the ridged head, webbed arms, and bloodied claws. He was able to retire to bed with the sensation of a day well spent, even if part of it had had to be spent brangling with Jody.

He did not sleep the night through. Three A.M. quite frequently found him awake, when book fair time drew near, as he told off Jody and the others. The shadows of early morning got the benefit of the things he didn't care to tell them, about the ignoring of experts the book fair was lucky enough to have working for nothing. Or the darkness would hear his computation of what he might have in his bank accounts if he spent all that time pumping gas at minimum wage instead of volunteering his time to the ungrateful.

And sometimes he listened to the darkness. Night always creaked. Popping sounds and crackling that were never heard by daylight came through loud and clear. It was nothing he meant to worry about. The place creaked, that was all.

But you couldn't help it, somehow, at three in the morning.

Why was the place creaking quite so much this time? An old bookcase might be slipping its moorings. Or perhaps a window was being pressed on by a coldhearted fiend preparing to break in and steal all his Hammetts and Chandlers.

Cursing himself, he reached for the bedside lamp and switched it on. Blinking, he studied his surroundings. Nothing was moving. A couple of paperbacks on his stack from the library had slipped free, but none seemed to have fallen on the floor. *Blood on the Widow* rested on top, its cover gleaming in the light.

Henry frowned. Hadn't he bagged the book yet? Maybe not; he'd been so busy measuring the poster. That would be something to occupy his mind, anyway; a little job to do would be enough to get him in the mood for another four hours' sleep.

His eyes flicked to the box of book bags and then to the tape dispenser. If this was going to involve a lot of rearranging, there was no sense getting out of bed at all. When he looked back to *Blood on the Widow*, it was lying open.

This puzzled him, but he supposed it was reasonable. That poster probably disrupted the block of pages so much that the book opened automatically to that point when it had a chance. He could see a Signet underneath it that might be tipping it up just enough for that.

He reached for the covers to push them back. But that's when he saw the hand unfolding the poster, from the inside.

\*

Only the bed was spoiled by the blood, so as soon as the police had finished taking pictures, Henry's executor called in the library to pick up the books. "He would have wanted it that way," said Jody, who had come along on the pickup to help pack the books into shopping bags.

"I hope so," said Henry's executor, an elderly cousin. "I wonder if I shouldn't have had them appraised first, though."

"Looks like just a lot of paperbacks to me," Jody noted.

The man shrugged. "Sometimes those can be worth money. Oh, here's one I've heard of." He picked up a book lying closed on the desk. "Realistic Novel Library. I hear there are only six or seven of these around. They came with a foldout poster, so I guess they fell apart pretty easy."

Jody looked at the woman on the cover and sniffed. "Does anybody really want those?"

"Yeah, they're rare, you know." He riffled the pages. "They had some kind of problem with their printers. The ones I've seen all had ... here it is."

He unfolded the wad of paper at the center of the book. "See? The posters came out blank."

# THE CASE OF THE JUGGLED JEWELS

Albert Bashover



Illustration by Hank Blaustein

Alfred Hitchcock Mystery Magazine 2/96

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**T**he little man ran his hand through his thinning mouse-brown hair, removed his glasses, rubbed his red-rimmed eyes, and put the glasses on the open ledger in front of him. "I'm a dead man, Gloria. A dead man. There's no way I can hide that half-million shortage. When the auditors tell Big Max Conners about the missing money, he's going to send a couple of his New York goons to Florida, and I'll be swimming with the fishes in Biscayne Bay."

"Oh, stop whining, Ted." His wife, Gloria, stood up and put her hands on her wide hips in an attitude of disgust. She was a large woman, and the big bright floral design on her shorts and shirt outfit did nothing to disguise her size. "So we borrowed a few dollars from the company for some personal investments. If they'd paid off, we could have returned the money with enough left over to retire."

"But they didn't pay off. I never should have listened to you."

"If you hadn't listened to me, you'd still be the assistant accountant in a third-rate firm instead of part owner of Conex Industries."

The little man seemed to shrink even smaller into his shirt.

"Conners won't send the auditors down for another three

months. We've got time to think up something."

"But . . ."

"Stop with the buts, already."

"But what if he becomes suspicious and sends someone down earlier?"

"Why should he? Conex is one of the few legitimate businesses Big Max is connected with. He's trusted you to run the company here. And you've never given him a reason to worry. He even gave you the key to his house so you could keep an eye on it while he was up north. He has no reason to be suspicious of anything."

"But . . ."

"Oh, shut up, Ted. Wait!" Gloria was staring at Ted but not seeing him. Slowly her lids contracted, and a light began to glow in her beady black eyes. "There might be a way out." Her eyes refocused sharply on her husband. "Ted, you once told me that Conners gave you the combination to the wall safe in the house."

Ted's eyes grew wide. "Gloria, you must be crazy! We're in enough trouble with the big guy already, you can't . . ."

"Don't tell me what I can't do. We'll do whatever we have to to get out of this spot. Now, tell me. Can you get into Big Max's safe?"

"Of course. I have to. Once in a while he asks me to send him



papers from it. He knows. I wouldn't touch anything I wasn't supposed to."

"What does he keep in there, Ted?" Gloria asked almost politely.

"Just a lot of legal papers and some jewelry. No cash."

"Jewelry? How much jewelry?"

"There's a box of it. He bought most of it for his ex-wife, but ever since she ran off with his chauffeur, he's kept it locked away, as if he doesn't want to be reminded of it."

"Do you think there's enough to cover our shortfall?"

"Please, Gloria," said Ted. "Conners trusts me, all right, but he still checks that safe whenever he comes down here, and he knows I'm the only one besides himself who knows the combination. If anything is missing..."

"Oh, why did I have to marry a man with a computer brain but no imagination!" Gloria raised her chubby arms to the sky. "Now, listen closely, Ted." She spoke slowly and carefully, as if she were talking to a little boy. "All we have to do is borrow the jewelry for one day, see? Then we take it to a respectable jeweler and have it appraised. We take the appraisals to our insurance company and have the jewelry insured in our names. Then we put the jewels

back in Big Max's safe. The next week we have a break-in here. All our jewels are stolen. Get it? Big Max is happy. He'll never know we borrowed his stuff. He'll still have his jewelry, and we collect the insurance money. It's foolproof."

The little man shook his head slowly. "I don't know, Gloria. I'm always afraid of a foolproof scheme. There might be some fool who..."

"Oh, shut up, Ted. Go get the keys to the car."

**D**etective Edgar Snavelly worshiped Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes, but over time, Edgar's vision of Holmes got mixed up with the Basil Rathbone movie version. He affected the deerstalker hat, the tweed jacket, and the meerschaum pipe of his idol even in the south Florida clime. He would have played the violin if he could, but in high school his music teacher saw that Edgar was one of the few students tall enough to carry a tuba in the marching band, so that's what he was stuck with. Over the years, the tuba had served Edgar well. He found that his deductive mind could be free for serious thinking while he hugged his tuba and noodled a tune. It didn't bother the neighbors too much;





except for his tendency to play a B natural when the piece called for a B flat.

Edgar stood at the window of his second floor office holding his now battered instrument and idly blew a low-register version of "Abide with Me" for an audience of one. Suddenly he stopped. His tall, gangling body bent slightly as he leaned forward to look down the street towards the one story stucco police department building on the corner of Atlantic and First. It was nearly eleven o'clock, and the hot May Florida sun had cleared the streets of all but the maddest of dogs and the most English of Englishmen.

"You see, Thaddeus, that's the great difference between my brother-in-law, Captain James LeStreet of the Ocean City police department, and myself." He was talking to Thaddeus Dinsmore, the young man standing beside him.

Thaddeus Dinsmore, Detective Snaveley's protege, diarist, and underpaid boy-of-all-work, looked up at his mentor with awe in his pale brown eyes.

"Yes, Thaddeus, the difference between Captain LeStreet and myself is that he detects while I deduce." The lack of a response from Thaddeus prompted Edgar to continue.

"Look out this window, Thaddeus," said Edgar as he put the

tuba down, "and tell me what you see."

"I don't see anything, sir."

"Aha! We now have a third contribution, the observations of the ordinary man." Edgar looked at his venerating employee. "The very ordinary man. He sees nothing. My brother-in-law Captain LeStreet would simply see a man walking from his car to the police department, while a detective, trained in deductive reasoning, can see much more."

"More?"

"Of course. What color suit is that man wearing, Thaddeus?"

"Uh, black."

"Correct. A black pinstripe. Not quite the normal Floridian color for this time of year is it? What does that tell us, Thaddeus?"

"Uh . . ."

"Oh, come now. If you ever want to become a deductive detective in the mode of our progenitor, the first and greatest deducer, Sherlock Holmes, you must use your powers of observation to the fullest. There is only one person who would wear clothes like that in this climate. The man is obviously an undertaker."

"But where is his hearse?"

"Aha! Now you are beginning to think like a detective, Thaddeus. Our man has arrived in a taxi, and he is going into a police station. The obvious conclusion



is that he is an undertaker who has had his hearse stolen and is about to report it to the police."

"Amazing!" whispered Thaddeus.

"Elementary," said Snavelly.

Captain James LeStreet of the Ocean City police department exhibited a bit of surprise when his sergeant put the neat little business card on the desk in front of him. The card read *Tri-State Insurance, Lionel Gimble, Vice-President.*

"He isn't here to sell you insurance, captain. He's here from their Boston office to ask you some questions about the Venturo burglary case."

The captain scratched the white fringe of hair that surrounded his round, shiny bald head. "I don't know what I can tell him that wasn't in the reports I turned over to Tri-State, but I guess I can't blame them for not giving up easily. That's a big amount they're going to have to give to the Venturos. Okay, sarge, send him in."

Lionel Gimble was as small and neat as his business card. He had a pinched, lined face and he looked as if he had just sucked a lemon. His dark pinstriped suit, neatly made tie, and black shoes stamped him as neither a native of South Florida nor one of its tourists.

"I'm so glad you could see me,

captain. I know how busy you must be." He spoke in a high-pitched nasal twang that made LeStreet think of a small town in New England.

"Have a seat, Mr. Gimble. That trip from Boston can be tiring. I'm not very busy right now. This is May, and most of the 'snowbirds' have returned to their nests up north. Without the winter tourists, we're really a small and peaceful community. In fact, that Venturo burglary was the first big-time robbery we've had since I've been on the force here, and that's been over thirty years. I'm sorry we weren't able to catch the perpetrators, but I assure you we did our best. I understand your company will have to pay out quite a bit of money."

"A half million dollars," Lionel Gimble said. The pained look on his pale, pinched face made LeStreet feel as if the money came directly from Gimble's own wallet. "Of course we've paid more than that amount on other claims, captain, but this policy was less than two months old."

LeStreet's eyebrows raised quizzically. "A new policy? I didn't know that. So you suspect hanky-panky?"

"I was hoping you could tell me something about that possibility, captain. After all, it was



your men who worked on the case."

LeStreet didn't like the way the conversation was going. "As far as the Ocean City police department is concerned, Mr. Gimble, it was a simple case of breaking and entering, and it was thoroughly investigated. Mr. Venturo's alarm system, which was fairly simple, had been disabled, and the wall safe—also a simple one—had been opened by a very neat safe-cracker. We checked the whereabouts of the Venturos that evening, and determined that they were visiting friends in the Keys for the weekend. They didn't return for two days. By the time they did, and we were notified, any chance of catching the criminals was greatly diminished."

"Oh, please don't misunderstand, captain. I wasn't implying laxness on your part; I'm just here to ask for your help. Normally, we would put one of our own investigators to work on the case, but our company's offices are primarily in the Northeast. You, captain, are very familiar with this area. We were hoping you could recommend a local private investigator who might be able to help us out."

LeStreet leaned back in his chair with an inner smile. Here was a chance to please his wife Dottie by steering some busi-

ness to her beloved brother, Edgar Snavelly. But more important, here was a job that could keep his weird brother-in-law out of his rapidly diminishing hair for awhile. The robbery had taken place a month ago. It was unlikely Edgar could uncover anything that would make the Ocean City police look bad.

"You are very lucky, Mr. Gimble. It just so happens that there's a very—uh, unique licensed investigator whose office is just down the street. I believe he's available at the moment. He should be able to give you all the time you need." LeStreet could hold his smile no longer. "Yes, all the time you need."

Thaddeus laid the neat little business card on the desk in front of Snavelly. "It's the same man we saw going into the police department building, sir. He says he would like to talk to you about taking an assignment."

Snavelly leaned back in his chair, drew on his meerschaum, and let a column of smoke float to the slowly revolving fan above his desk. "And I suppose you noticed that his card describes the man as an insurance representative?"

"Yes, sir, I did. I suppose we might have been wrong in thinking he was an undertaker."

"Oh, come now, Thaddeus. How many different business

cards do you think I have in my wallet right now?"

"Uh . . ."

"At least ten. In our profession we must be prepared to assume any number of identities."

"So you think Mr. Gimble might be a detective?"

"As usual, Thaddeus, you are two steps behind. A detective would not find it necessary to deceive another detective if his business were legitimate. No, Thaddeus. There's another kind of person who would find it necessary to hide his true occupation from us: a criminal who intends to use us for some illegal purpose."

"Amazing!" said Thaddeus.

"Elementary," said Edgar, putting the card in his pocket. "Now show this Mr. Gimble in. Take notes, Thaddeus, and listen closely to what he has to say. Use whatever meager powers of deduction you have been able to develop. This may turn out to be a more interesting case than it appears on the surface."

Snively put on his deerstalker hat and sat so his hawklike profile would be obvious to anyone entering his office. Edgar knew the importance of appearances, and it was important that prospective clients knew the caliber of detective they were getting.

Lionel Gimble managed not to react to the apparition from a

1930's movie behind the desk. He didn't even pay any attention to the tuba, sitting bell down on the floor next to him. Sitting down stiffly on the chair offered him, he explained to Edgar, in his high-pitched nasal drone, about the jewel robbery at the Venturos' home and his company's obligation to pay a half million dollars. When he was finished, he laid a piece of paper on the desk.

"This is a description of the jewels we are looking for, Mr. Snively. We have learned that Conex, the company Ted Venturo runs, is a partnership between Mr. Venturo and Big Max Conners, a notorious gangster from New York. We know Mr. Conners owns a home here at 336 Ocean Drive and visits Florida occasionally. We don't know if he has any involvement in the burglary, but given Conners' background, there might be some connection.

"We want the local pawnshops, jewelry stores, and fences checked to see if any of the stolen jewels have turned up, of course, but professional burglars would probably be too smart to let the jewels show up too soon. More important, we would like you to keep an eye on Mr. and Mrs. Venturo, and Mr. Conners; if he comes here. If the burglary was faked, the Venturos or Mr. Conners might still



have the jewels in their possession." One side of Gimble's pinched mouth twitched up as if trying to smile. "We are an ethical insurance company, so of course we don't break into houses, but we would like to know where those jewels are."

Snavely unwound his tall frame from his chair and walked towards the window, trailing a blue-gray tail of smoke from his meerschaum. "Your problem interests me, Mr. Gimble. Our motto is 'No crime goes unsolved when Snavely's involved,' and we always live up to it. We would be happy to take the case. Now, if you would be good enough to tell me, where and how often would you like my progress reports made?"

"You have my card," said Gimble as he rose to leave. "Phone me at that number once a week, unless of course something special happens."

As soon as the door closed behind Gimble, Thaddeus jumped up. "We have a case, Mr. Snavely," he said joyfully. "Shall I find out where the Venturos live and start a surveillance? Mr. Gimble sort of hinted that they might have faked the robbery."

"Slowly, slowly," said the detective as he patted the young man's head. "As usual, you are jumping to obvious conclusions instead of following the path

that intelligent deductive reasoning would indicate."

"But . . ."

"Think, Thaddeus. Here we have an obvious criminal. A man who disguises himself first as an undertaker, then as an insurance man, who tries to trick us into finding some jewels for him.

"Now let's try another scenario. Suppose this Mr. Gimble, in keeping with his criminal nature, was part of the burglary team that burglarized the poor Venturos."

"Why would he want us to look for the jewels if he was the one who stole them?" asked a confused Thaddeus.

"Elementary, my dear boy. He no longer has them."

"Then who . . ."

"The key was the word 'burglars.' Our friend Gimble used the plural when he talked about the robbery. Gimble must have had a partner. A partner who doublecrossed him and kept the loot for himself."

"But who . . ."

"Oh come, Thaddeus. Must I do all your thinking for you?" Snavely put down his meerschaum. "What other figure has been named in this affair? A known criminal, a man noted for having his finger in every sort of illicit activity?"

"Big Max Conners!" beamed Thaddeus.



"Correct!" said Edgar as he picked up the tuba and tucked it under his arm. "Logic tells us that it's Big Max who has the jewels now. Big Max Conners has a nasty reputation in New York for taking care of anyone who crosses him, so Gimble probably wants us to do his dirty work for him. That's why he not so subtly suggested that we do some breaking and entering to find the loot. I don't like the idea of doing anything illegal, but the only way to prove my deductions is to get into Big Max's house and find those jewels." Edgar marched across the room to the strains of "Asleep in the Deep." Which might have been beautiful if he had played the B flat instead of the B natural.

**R**oute A1A runs north and south along several slim barrier islands on the east coast of Florida. For much of its length, it's a bucolic two-lane road that separates the mansions and expensive highrises on the intercoastal waterway from the mansions and expensive highrises on the ocean front. By law all beaches in Florida must be open to the public. To keep the public at bay, the mansion owners on the ocean side made sure that most of A1A did not have sidewalks and that "No Parking" signs were prominent-

ly displayed along its length. Except for a few public openings, the only way to get to the ocean was through the wrought-iron gates of one of the mansions or by helicopter.

"Shifty" Monroe knew this, but as a professional burglar, it didn't bother him at all. He hid his little motorbike in the dense bushes just outside the gate of the house at 336 Ocean Drive and nimbly hopped over the cement wall. It was two o'clock in the morning. Shifty had no fear of being observed. He had picked this house because several nights of surveillance had indicated that it was unoccupied, and its isolated location made it ideal for leisurely pickings.

It didn't take him long to find the wall safe in the bedroom behind the mirror. Shifty could never figure out why these so-called smart millionaires would put so much money into a house, and then install a pressed steel safe that gave way to a crowbar in a matter of minutes. But the bedroom safe was empty. That indicated that there was another safe, probably in the library or the living room. A few minutes of searching produced a wall safe behind an Erté painting in the library. A few jabs with the crowbar revealed the contents. Mostly legal papers. Shifty was disap-



pointed. He was hoping for cash. Along with the papers was a long steel box with a snap latch. He popped it open and saw a jumble of woman's jewelry. Jewelry was a pain in the neck. It had to be fenced, and that meant that he would be lucky to get five cents on the dollar. Not only that, but cubic zirconium was becoming very popular so what looked like a good haul could very well not be worth the effort.

Suddenly Shifty froze. His always alert ears noted that the sounds coming from A1A had changed. A car had stopped. There was the *thunk* of a car door closing, then the sound of a car resuming its way down the road.

Just my luck, thought Shifty. They had to pick tonight to return. He dropped his crowbar into the canvas bag hung over his shoulder, tucked the jewel box under his other arm, and headed out through the broken sliding door at the rear of the house where he had entered.

As he stepped onto the rear patio, he saw a shadow of a figure round the rear corner of the house to his right. A security guard he hadn't spotted during his surveillance? Shifty wasn't about to inquire. He made a sharp left turn and broke into a sprint. Unfortunately, he didn't see the raised lip along the edge

of the tiled patio. A neatly executed somersault kept him from breaking some bones, but the jewelry box and his bag of tools were left behind as he ran to his motorbike hidden in the bushes.

After Snavely dropped Thaddeus off in front of 336 Ocean Drive, he continued to drive south on A1A for about fifteen minutes. He figured that half an hour should be enough time for Thaddeus to look over the Connors house and make plans for a search. Making a U turn, he returned, slowing down as he neared the house. The headlights of his car picked out the figure of Thaddeus waiting near the scrollwork iron gate at the front. There was a canvas bag at his feet and something under his left arm. Edgar stopped the car. Thaddeus threw the canvas bag into the back seat, where it landed with a loud clank, and hopped into the front seat next to Edgar. He put a long metal box on his lap.

"I see you were able to get into the house," said Edgar.

"I didn't really have to," said the breathless Thaddeus. "I was looking around the grounds to see if the house was secure when I spotted a guy coming out of a broken rear door. The man saw me, broke into a run, and dropped this stuff. I think the fellow was a burglar because





when I looked in the house, I saw that the wall safe had been forced open. I think this box came from there."

"Well, let's take a look at what you have," suggested Snavelly.

Thaddeus flipped open the latch and lifted the lid. "Wow!" he gasped as the light from the dashboard sparkled over the gems in the box. "I guess you were right, Mr. Snavelly. These look like the jewels that the insurance papers described as being stolen from the Venturos."

"You shouldn't be too surprised, Thaddeus. After all, deduction, when practiced by a master, is a science, not an art.

"Now we must get these jewels back to their rightful owners. But first we must get Conners and his accomplice Gimble to confess to their crime. I'm afraid my brother-in-law Captain Le-Street can't pin this crime on them by himself. We should try to help him out."

"How are you going to do that?" inquired Thaddeus.

"The deductive mind is an imaginative mind, my boy. I will set up a sequence of events so that our denouement will achieve all these ends."

"Wow," said Thaddeus again. It always impressed him when his employer used words he didn't understand, like "denouement."

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The following day, Tuesday, the fax lines were busy. Big Max Conners received a message in his New York office telling him that his Florida home had been burglarized but that the valuables taken from his wall safe had been recovered. He could have them back if he came to the Florida office of Detective Edgar Snavelly in Ocean City, Florida, at one P.M. on Thursday to identify them.

The same day, Lionel Gimble received a fax in Boston saying simply that the jewels from the Venturo burglary had been recovered. They could be picked up at Detective Edgar Snavelly's office in Florida at one P.M. on Thursday if he personally identified them.

When Gloria and Ted Venturo came home Tuesday evening, they found a message on their answering machine, in a voice they didn't recognize, stating that their jewels had been recovered. If they would come to the offices of Detective Edgar Snavelly at one P.M. on Thursday, they could collect them.

"I knew it," said Ted. His eyes were wide with fear. "Somebody knows. Somebody's trying to blackmail us."

"Oh, shut up, Ted!" That was the first thing Gloria always said before she started thinking. She paced the kitchen. "There's no way anyone could



have Big Max's jewelry." She turned sharply and glared at Ted. "You did return it to the safe, didn't you?"

"Yes."

"So there's nothing to worry about. Maybe this is some sort of scam, or maybe this detective picked up some stuff from a different robbery and is trying to get in on the insurance money. In any case, we have nothing to lose by going to this guy's office. If he really does have some jewels to show us, who knows, we might even be able to turn this into a profit."

"This isn't going right, Gloria," Ted whined. "I told you . . ."

"Oh, shut up, Ted."

On Wednesday evening, Dottie served her husband, Police Captain James LeStreet, sauerbraten and cabbage, his favorite supper. LeStreet immediately knew something was up, and it probably had to do with Dottie's favorite brother, detective Edgar Snavelly. Whenever Dottie served sauerbraten, she was about to ask James to do something he would rather not do, and anything to do with Edgar Snavelly was high on the list of things that James would rather not do.

"I got a call from Edgar this afternoon." (He had guessed right.) "He said he tried to reach you at the office but you were

out. He said it was very important that you stop in at his office tomorrow at one P.M."

"I suppose once again he has solved a crime that has stumped my poor inadequate police department for years."

"Oh, don't be cynical, James. As a matter of fact, he said he had some important information about the Venturo jewelry robbery that you'd be interested in. You know how much he's helped you in the past."

LeStreet opened his mouth to tell his wife just how much he appreciated Edgar's past help, but the aroma of the sauerbraten and cabbage wafted past his nose and stopped his speech. Oh well, he thought. Things are usually slow on Thursdays. I suppose I could waste an hour or so listening to Edgar.

Edgar made a last minute check of the miniature microphone hidden in the pipe rack on his desk and the tape recorder in the upper right-hand drawer. If he could get the two criminals, Gimble and Conners, together, they would implicate each other in the Venturo robbery. It would make life much easier for the prosecutors, and LeStreet would appreciate that.

There was a short buzz, and the voice of Thaddeus came over the intercom from the outer of-

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fice. "Mr. Gimble to see you, Mr. Snavelly."

"Send him in," said Edgar as he sat down behind his desk and lit his meerschaum. The closed jewel box was at the center of the desk in front of him.

"I hope I didn't come all the way down here for nothing," Gimble said as he walked in. His face indicated that the plane ride from Boston had not been smooth. "Am I to believe you've recovered the Venturo jewels in less than a week?"

"I haven't earned my reputation on fancy, Mr. Gimble," said Edgar. He blew a whiff of smoke towards the ceiling and flipped open the jewel box.

Gimble's puckered face almost smiled. "Amazing," he said as he blinked at the sparkling gems. "To tell the truth, Mr. Snavelly, I didn't have much faith that you could really find them, but those are the Venturo jewels all right. How did you do it?"

"With the help of a friend of yours," said Snavelly.

"A friend of mine?"

Once again the intercom buzzed. "A Mr. Connors to see you, Mr. Snavelly," said Thaddeus.

"Perfect timing," smiled Edgar. "Send him in."

Big Max's bulk filled the doorway. He looked like a linebacker for the Giants who had found an expensive tailor. His broad face

had a well-chewed cigar sticking out of one corner of a wide mouth. A deep voice growled out from somewhere in his belly, "What's goin' on here, bud? I checked my house. It was busted into, like you said, and not too neat. You say you got my stuff? Where . . ." At that point Connors spotted the open box on Edgar's desk. "Yeah, that's my stuff. How did you get it?"

Snavelly stood up. He was as tall as Connors but one-eighth the density. "One moment, Mr. Connors," he said. "Don't you want to say hello to an old friend?" He nodded at Gimble.

"Huh?" Connors gave Gimble a curious look. "Who's he? I never saw him before in my life."

Snavelly smiled a cynical smile. "You say these gems are yours, and that you and Mr. Gimble here do not know each other?"

Before Connors could answer, the intercom buzzed once more. "A Mr. and Mrs. Venturo to see you, Mr. Snavelly," came the electronically nasal version of Thaddeus's voice.

"Send them in, Thaddeus," said Edgar. "Now we'll get to the bottom of this."

Again the intercom buzzed. "Police Captain LeStreet is also here to see you, sir."

"Good. Send them all in."

Ted Venturo looked even more worried than usual. He



didn't like the idea that a policeman was invited to the meeting. A glowering Gloria was right behind him. This meeting was not going as she had expected. Following them was the rotund figure of Captain LeStreet.

"What's going on here, Edgar?" demanded an irritated LeStreet. "Dottie insisted I stop by, but I've got things to do at the office . . ."

"I think you'll find this meeting profitable, James. We are about to unravel the mystery of the Venturo jewel robbery." Snavely picked up the box of gems and presented them to Ted. "Can you identify your jewels, Mr. Venturo?"

Ted took a look at the open box and backed away from it. His fearful eyes flickered from Big Max to Gloria, then back to Big Max again. "No. No. That's not the stuff that was stolen from me."

"Now, wait a minute," said Gimble as he stepped forward. "I looked that box over, and I can say unequivocally that those gems fit the description of the jewelry you had insured with my company."

"No," said Ted. "There must be some mistake. Those are Big Max's—er, Mr. Conners' jewels."

"How do you know that?" persisted Gimble.

"He should know it," interrupted Conners. "He's seen

them in my safe often enough. As my business partner, I sometimes let him go into my Florida home safe to get papers and such. I didn't think I had anything to worry about. I figured that nebbish would never try anything that would cross me." Conners took a step towards Ted and clenched his hamlike fists. "I guess maybe I was wrong."

Gimble's pinched eyes narrowed even more. "You say that Ted Venturo had access to your wall safe?"

"Yeah. So what? He wouldn't have to break into my house to get that jewelry. All he'd have to do is . . ."

"All he'd have to do," continued Gimble, "is borrow the jewels from your safe, insure them with us under his name, then return the jewels and stage a fake robbery at his own house. You would never know that the jewels had been borrowed, and my company would be out half a million dollars."

All eyes were focused on Ted Venturo, who was trying to shrink backwards into the ample, protective bosom of Gloria. "I told you, Gloria. I told you it wouldn't work."

"Oh, shut up, Ted."

LeStreet was not in good humor. First, because he didn't like fish and chips and that's

what Dottie always served when her brother was invited for dinner. Second, though Dottie wouldn't allow her husband to smoke his favorite cigar in the house, he had to watch Edgar sitting across the table from him, contentedly producing a heavily scented cloud from his meerschaum. ("It's such a manly aroma," Dottie would say.) Third and most important, because he knew that Dottie was about to say what James most hated to hear.

"Now, James. You've been quiet all evening. Don't you think it's about time you thanked Edgar for solving that jewel case for you?"

"Hmph," said LeStreet.

"Oh, that's not necessary," said Edgar magnanimously.

"I'm just glad that James was there to arrest Ted Venturo. If he hadn't been, Conners would have torn poor Ted apart. It seems that Conners has spent years trying to clean up his gangster image, and he didn't like the idea of his partner's getting Big Max Conners' name in the newspapers again."

"Well, I think it's perfectly wonderful how you figured out where the jewels were," bubbled Dottie. "I just don't see why James couldn't have done it himself."

"The ability to use deductive reasoning takes years of training, Dottie," explained Edgar. "I'd be happy to explain the fundamentals to James, if he is interested."

"Hmph," said LeStreet.

A WORD FROM THE EDITOR

Readers might be interested in knowing how the Mystery Classic, "Behind the Screen," came to have six authors. According to Julian Symons' introduction to its 1983 publication in book form, this and other multiple-author stories and novels were written by members of Britain's Detection Club to raise money to provide club premises. Dorothy L. Sayers organized the writing of "Behind the Screen," which was read by the several authors on the BBC in six installments in 1930. The story was subsequently published in the BBC's weekly magazine, *The Listener*. According to Sayers, the first three authors of "Behind the Screen" took the story where their imaginations led them. The last three, "used their wits, in consultation," to finish what the first three had begun.

MYSTERY CLASSIC

BEHIND THE SCREEN

Hugh Walpole, Agatha Christie,
Dorothy L. Sayers,
Anthony Berkeley, E. C. Bentley
Ronald Knox



*Chapter I**by Hugh Walpole*

Hate was the principal feeling in young Wilfred Hope's mind as he walked hurriedly down Sunflower Lane one wet and stormy evening. Hatred was not his natural emotion. Indeed, until a year ago he had been a clever, bright, happy young student at one of the larger London hospitals with splendid prospects of a fine career, and his only thoughts had been for his work and for the girl to whom he was engaged, whom he loved more than his work or life itself. Life had been everything that was happy and industrious and gay, and now as he hurried along, it was everything that was sinister and troubled and foreboding. He had for many months now spent evening after evening after supper in the comfortable, cosy home of the Ellises, the family to which Amy Ellis, the girl to whom he was engaged, belonged. And as he hurried along to the Ellises' house, in spite of his agitation and disturbance, and even, perhaps, something—for who knows exactly what was in his heart—even perhaps something of terror, he was thinking to himself how desperately things lately had changed, and changed, as he well knew, entirely because of one person, and it was this person who was dominating his mind so especially.

Almost exactly a year before this evening the Ellises had taken, as a kind of paying guest, a man, Paul Dudden. Dudden was some forty-five years of age, heavy, stout, white-faced, unattractive, monosyllabic; engaged, it seemed, in some business in the City, but had offered the Ellises, who were none too well off, some considerable income for his sojourn, so they had taken him eagerly as their guest. They had taken him in the greatest innocence of their hearts, but within a very short period Dudden, who had seemed at first a man of no particular personality, had acquired over all of them a most curious dominance. Young Wilfred thought of the family—stout, good-natured Mrs. Ellis, with her cheerful smile and her easy, happy way of taking things; old Mr. Ellis, very much older than his wife, a little shrimp of a man; young Robert, a boy of perhaps twenty or so, not very prepossessing, rather of the pimply, pale, uneasy order at present, showing no very great disposition to

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work, rather a worry to his parents; and the fourth of the family, Amy herself, who was, as young Wilfred thought, the loveliest of all the girls in England—and, indeed, without his own particular prejudice, she was a girl of extraordinary charm. This was the Ellis family, and within a short period of Dudden's coming to them they had begun most mysteriously to change. Old Mr. Ellis, who had always been a nervous, shy little man, had seemed to redouble his shyness and uneasiness. Amy herself had lost some of her brightness. Young Robert was more sullen, more silent than he had been. Only cheerful Mrs. Ellis seemed to show no change. As for Wilfred, who can describe the change in his heart? As he walked, the thin rain beating in his face, the wind tearing among the trees on either side, the storm seemed to portray some of his own hideous feeling. For it was hideous. He who had never perhaps in all his life disliked anyone now wished every evil possible to this man, for not only did he threaten the peace and happiness of the family for which Wilfred cared most in the world, but also it seemed that of late he had been having a strange influence over Amy herself, and Wilfred had even a kind of fear that she might break off her engagement with him. So, indeed, he was a miserable creature as he hastened.

He reached the little gate, pushed it back, hurried up the little garden path, rang the bell on the so familiar door. For a moment he had a strange disposition to return. Something seemed to say to him that tonight he would be better away. He had felt it on several occasions of late; the evenings had not been the sort of happy ones they used to be. But no, his pride refused to keep him back; he rang the bell and waited. The door was almost at once opened by a very familiar figure—the large-capped housekeeper, friend, servant of the family, Mrs. Hulk, a woman who had been with the Ellises for many years. Wilfred usually stayed and spoke with her, for he was a great favorite of hers, but tonight in his own agitation and unhappiness he brushed past her just nodding and hurried, indeed, so fast that he did not notice that after he had gone Mrs. Hulk, not closing the door, stepped outside into the wind and the rain—stepped outside, hurried down the little path, and stood by the gate looking eagerly up and down the little road. That was indeed unusual behavior for her, for she was a most placid and happy person, but tonight her large, broad face was wrinkled with anxiety as she looked about her. Was she expecting someone? Did she fancy that someone was hiding behind those dark, whirling trees? Was it, perhaps, that she was waiting for a message or a sign? At any rate,

there in the wind and the rain she stood, so absorbed in her own particular purpose that she never noticed what was going on around her. Wilfred meanwhile had hung up his hat, put away his coat, and knocked on the familiar door, entering without waiting, and there was the scene to which he was so accustomed.

The drawing room of the Ellises was of the old fashioned kind, the last word, perhaps, in comfort because the furniture had been used by them all for so long, but by our modern ideas desperately overcrowded—little tables covered with photographs and knick-knacks and on the mantelpiece above that roaring fire strange Chinese ornaments, dogs with blue faces, mandarins and their ladies, and large vases with “everlastings” brushing a little dustily one against the other. And covering almost all the farther end of one wall stood a large, old fashioned Japanese screen, which was to Wilfred by now almost as familiar as his own clothes; a screen covered with black and gilt figures of a familiar kind, and near it a large pot with an aspidistra. Mrs. Ellis was sitting by the fire reading, as she loved to do, out of a novel aloud. Opposite her was Amy, who gave Wilfred a smile as he came in. Near her, moving uneasily in his chair, sat young Robert, and at a little table not far away was old Mr. Ellis, bent up over the table playing his favorite game of patience, as was always his evening custom.

Wilfred sat down opposite the screen and near Mrs. Ellis. She was reading. ““Oh!”” she read, ““oh, Robert!” cried Lucy. “Mine at last! How long I have waited for this moment.” And hurrying across the floor he threw himself on his knees before his beloved, clasping her in his arms.”

“There,” cried Mrs. Ellis, for a moment letting the book drop into her lap. “Isn’t that perfectly beautiful?” Amy nodded, to please her mother. Wilfred indeed did not hear the words, for, strangely, from the moment that he had entered and sat down, he felt an uneasiness quite new in his experience. Was it his own disturbed feelings or was there really something in the room? He sat there telling himself not to be foolish, but no, the impression grew. There were all the familiar things, the little tables, the photographs, the china ornaments, the screen, everything so comfortable, that roaring fire, the family he knew so well; but he had the oddest impression that somewhere, behind the curtain, behind the screen, even behind himself—and this was the most awful fear of all—some other person was also in the room, shadowing him, watching his every movement.

His discomfort grew. Mrs. Ellis's voice seemed to whirl in the air with a strange, indeterminate sound. He could not listen to her voice. He looked at Amy to reassure himself, and then, oddly, although he loved her so much, he had a fear lest she should look up and meet his eyes. He did not want to meet them, but this sense that he was himself in a way a criminal made him even more uneasy than before. His gaze wandered to young Robert, tall, thin and bony, with clothes that fitted him not too well, sitting awkwardly in his chair, jerking himself backwards and forward, and as he jerked himself, Wilfred was suddenly aware that his white cuffs shot out with each jerk from beyond his sleeves. These cuffs fascinated Wilfred, and looking more closely, he suddenly seemed to see on them some strange markings. Could they be stains? Ink, perhaps. No. Something. He tried to look more closely, but the room began to swim, possibly with the heat of the fire—and then he fancied that young Robert was aware of his glance and shot his cuffs back again, and even put one hand over one of them to stop its protruding. Were there marks on those cuffs? Was there something that Robert wanted to hide? And then he began inwardly to laugh at his own sense of disturbance. What could be quieter and more happy now than this room, with his friends, everything, with the old clock ticking the minutes away? His agitation continued. He began himself to be desperately restless. He moved his chair a little, and so came closer to old Mr. Ellis, bent up over the table, playing with cards. He watched, trying to get rid of his own irritation, and as he watched he was suddenly aware of the strangest thing. For old Mr. Ellis—so shy and nervous and ordinary a little man, who had never, surely, done anything wrong in the whole of his life, who was dominated almost completely by his charming, happy, and merry wife—old Mr. Ellis was not playing patience although he was moving the cards. One fell upon another in the little rows that belonged to the game; but they fell in complete disorder; there was no discipline of numbers or of colors; he was moving them idly, his thoughts far away. What was the matter? Of what was he thinking? Why was he not playing? And Wilfred tried to see if he could discover in him some special anxiety. But his face was hidden, and while he watched, now becoming so convinced that somebody else was indeed in the room beside himself, he almost burst out, interrupting the reading with, "Tell me, is Dudden coming in tonight?"—although he knew that it was a fatal question to ask, for at the name of that heavy, sinister, stout, pale-faced man all the Ellis

family seemed at once to change their nature, to shrink inside themselves, to guard themselves against some enemy. And so feeling, and so conscious that whatever else he did the name of Dudden must never be mentioned, but wanting with a kind of burning anxiety to turn direct to Amy and say, "Well, what's that man been saying to you today, dear?"—knowing that that would blow the whole family, as it were, into the air like an explosion, holding himself in with the most desperate intention, so he sat, and in spite of his intention knew that he was waiting for something.

He wished, if he could, to get nearer to young Robert. He had such a strange suspicion that the boy was desperately unhappy, and although he had never liked him and they had nothing in common, still he felt that perhaps he could explain something of the distress that he was suffering. He moved his chair yet again, and as he moved it, he was conscious he was now very close to cheerful Mrs. Ellis. He was conscious that the whole room seemed to change its position. So fantastic now were his fears and agitation that it seemed to him as though every piece of furniture there—yes, and every little photograph, every little family album—were all playing some part, that they had a consciousness of somebody's presence there beyond his own. It was as though he would have liked to have picked up those china ornaments and asked them to say whether they could give him some of their secret.

This was absurd. He had not been so clever a medical student for so long, he had not experienced so many strange, direct, real things in life that he could not now control himself. So in his determination that he would show no emotion, that he would beat down his own agitation, he moved his chair again. And now he suddenly realized that he could see—behind the screen. He looked, and at that sight suddenly his whole being seemed to be convulsed with a dreadful terror. Now indeed there was reason enough. He gripped the arms of his chair. The whole room swam up like the surging deck of a ship in a stormy sea and surged down again, and he could hear all the little china ornaments and the tables and the albums resettlement themselves with a kind of sigh. For behind the screen, lying there huddled up, almost as though in sleep, his dreadful head turned towards Wilfred, pale, ashen, lying upon an arm, his heavy body crumpled up in a kind of strange attitude as though someone had twisted its limbs in different directions, there, dead beyond any question, lay Dudden. Dudden dead, and Dudden horribly dead. For now Wilfred saw in his exceeding horror that from the collar,

and the neck that protruded, spread a thin stream of most dreadful blood, staining the carpet, spreading farther and farther, welling out in the most dreadful, uninterrupted sequence. He saw with a new terror that the stream would soon be beyond the screen. Soon the others in the room would see it. Soon his horror would be theirs. He was about to cry. He saw it lying heavily, spread out, and now as it seemed, entrapping with its sinister signs the whole room. Mrs. Ellis, with a sigh of satisfaction at the beauty of what she was reading, once more let the book drop, looked up smiling at the company, looked up and saw that dreadful stream, looked up and gave a shrill cry—"Look! look! the blood!"

Chapter II

by Agatha Christie

With Mrs. Ellis's shriek, Wilfred regained possession of his faculties. The numbing feeling of paralysis passed away. He was himself once more, cool, efficient, able to take command of the situation.

Crossing the room, he knelt by Dudden's body. He was vaguely aware of the others; of Mr. Ellis, half risen from the card table; his mouth open, his eyes staring; of Amy, of Robert, of Mrs. Ellis. They were all there behind him, waiting, peering, listening for the authoritative words he would soon speak.

He was careful not in any way to disturb the position of the body—a queer, huddled position—he noted it automatically. The most cursory examination was all that was needed. Dudden was dead. The blood had welled from a wound in the neck, near the angle of the jawbone.

There was a curious expression on Wilfred's face as he bent over the dead man. Those eyes—those dead staring eyes—why surely . . . ? No, this wasn't his business. He mustn't imagine things. But it was odd—distinctly odd.

He rose to his feet. . . .

"He's dead," he said briefly.

"Oh!" It was a low moaning cry that broke from Amy's lips. She turned deathly pale, swayed, and clutched at her mother.

"Come, my dear, come." The stout woman was compelling. "Come, Amy love. . . ."

Putting her arm round the girl, she led her gently from the room. Her supporting arm kept the girl from falling.

Wilfred drew a sigh of relief as the women left the room. His eyes met those of Mr. Ellis. The latter seemed to be recovering from the shock.

"This is terrible—terrible," he ejaculated. "What is it, my boy? Suicide, I suppose. A terrible thing to happen in one's house."

"It's not suicide," said Wilfred.

"Not suicide—eh?"

"I'm not saying the wound couldn't have been self-inflicted. It could, though it's very unlikely. But in that case the weapon would have been still in the wound."

"The weapon?"

"Yes. He's been stabbed—stabbed with a sharp, narrow blade and there's no sign of such a thing anywhere near him. This is a case for the police, Mr. Ellis."

"You mean—"

"This is murder!" He repeated the word: "*Murder*. . . ."

"Murder? You can't mean it?"

"There's no doubt of it. You must ring up the police at once."

"I—I—"

Mr. Ellis hesitated, swallowed nervously, then went shakily from the room.

Really, Wilfred supposed, he ought to have offered to telephone for him. The old man was so upset that he hardly knew what he was doing, whereas he, Wilfred, was perfectly calm and collected. Nevertheless, he had felt the strongest objection to leaving the room. His place was here.

His attention was suddenly drawn to Robert. The young man was standing by the edge of the screen. He was staring downwards with fascinated eyes. Wilfred could see the Adam's apple in his throat jerking up and down, while his long pale fingers twisted and untwisted themselves nervously. A thoroughly neurotic type, Wilfred thought rather disgustingly.

How strangely the boy was staring at Dudden. No—that was odd—he was not looking at Dudden at all. His fascinated gaze was elsewhere—on the tiny rivulet of blood. It seemed to fascinate him. He looked almost hypnotized. Suddenly, with a convulsive shudder, Robert seemed to come to himself. He turned abruptly and almost ran from the room.

Wilfred felt a sense of relief. He was alone. Once more he bent

over the body, examining it carefully. Curious attitude—the man might have been asleep, but for that tell-tale stream of scarlet. And his eyes—most peculiar! An unpleasant man, given to unpleasant vices, but all the same Wilfred had never noticed before—oh! well, why think of it?

He raised a hand to brush the hair from his forehead and then started nervously.

There was blood on his fingers!

How did it come there? He had been most careful in his handling of Dudden. He had not touched the wound. He bent lower. There were dark smears on the cloth of Dudden's coat near its lower edge. He touched them—yes, they were faintly damp. They were smears of blood. How had they got there?

A slight sound made him turn his head. For a moment he saw nothing. The room was the same as usual—almost indecently peaceful. The patience cards still laid out on the table, Mrs. Ellis's book, a paper cutter between its pages, lying on her chair, a silk scarf of Amy's lying on the arm of the sofa. It was all as usual, as he had seen it a hundred times before.

The sound was repeated, and now Wilfred recognized it for what it was. Someone was pushing the door very cautiously open. He waited. Suddenly the rubicund face of Mrs. Hulk came peering round the door; an expression of mingled fear and excitement animated her countenance. She seemed taken aback at the sight of Wilfred. Then she pushed the door a little farther and came in. Her hands fingered her apron.

"'E's dead, is 'e?" she asked in a hoarse voice.

Wilfred nodded. He had just time to note that an expression of distinct satisfaction passed over her face when the doorbell rang. Mrs. Hulk went to answer it. There was a murmur of voices and Wilfred heard her say: "'E's in there. The young gentleman's there, too." Two men entered the room. The first wore the uniform of a police inspector, the second Wilfred put down correctly as the police surgeon.

"Evening," said the inspector. "Are you Mr. Ellis?"

"No—my name is Hope."

He explained the circumstances, indicated the body (which the inspector viewed without any show of emotion), and suggested that he should fetch Mr. Ellis.

"That's right," said the inspector. "But don't leave the house, Mr.

Hope. I shall want a word with you presently. All right, Dr. Larkin, you go ahead."

Wilfred left the room. The door from the hall to the kitchen was open, and he had a glimpse of Mrs. Ellis calmly and methodically helping Mrs. Hulk to wash up the supper dishes.

"Is that you, Wilfred?" she called. "Mrs. Hulk tells me the police have come."

"Yes. They want Mr. Ellis."

"I think he's in the dining room."

She finished wiping a coffee cup, hung the glass-cloth neatly on its nail, and joined Wilfred in the hall.

"How is Amy?"

"She is lying down on her bed, poor child. I have given her some sal volatile. She was completely overcome. It was, of course, a terrible shock for a young girl. And Amy is particularly sensitive. The police will not want to see her, will they?"

"I should not think so."

"Here's Father," said Mrs. Ellis, opening the dining room door.

Mr. Ellis was sitting on a chair by the window.

His face was buried in his hands. He started up nervously as they entered.

"What—I—what—"

"The police, dear," said his wife. "They've come."

"Oh! yes—yes, of course. They'll want to—to know about things—eh? I wonder what sort of things—eh?"

"They'll ask, of course, when you last saw Dudden alive," said Wilfred. "When did you, by the way?"

"At supper," said Mrs. Ellis. "We were late tonight—Father was late home."

"We were still at table when he left the house," said Mr. Ellis.

"Left the house?"

"Yes. Yes. He got up and went out rather abruptly. He fairly banged the front door after him. Something odd about him tonight, don't you think so, my dear?"

"One's always inclined to think that after a thing's happened," said Mrs. Ellis.

"What time did he go out?" asked Wilfred.

"I'm not quite sure. It must have been about a quarter past nine."

"And you never saw him again," said Wilfred slowly. "You don't know when he returned to the house?"

Mrs. Ellis shook her head.

"And the rest of you—what did you do?"

"Well—we sat here round the table a bit longer—ten minutes maybe—and then we went into the parlor."

"And none of you left the room during that ten minutes?"

"We were all here," answered Mrs. Ellis quickly. "Father—you'd better be going along. The police are waiting."

Mr. Ellis hurried quickly from the room. Wilfred wondered whether it was his fancy or whether he had been right in thinking that a slight expression of astonishment had passed over the old man's face at the last words his wife had spoken.

Would he have given a different answer?

"I suppose Mrs. Hulk would know when Dudden returned to the house?" Wilfred remarked.

"Possibly, but he had his own latchkey, you know. He never needed to ring the bell."

"I might ask her at any rate."

Mrs. Ellis raised no objection, and Wilfred left the room meaning to question Mrs. Hulk forthwith. But as he passed through the hall his purpose was diverted by a neat staccato rat-a-tat-tat on the front door. Wilfred opened the door. Outside he was confronted by someone whom he always thought of to himself as "that little mottled man from next door." So Mrs. Ellis had once described Mr. Parsons, the owner of "Swallow-cliffe," and the description remained in Wilfred's mind.

Excitement had caused Mr. Parsons to look more mottled than ever. He was stammering with pleasurable excitement.

"Excuse me," he said. "Excuse me. But is it really true that there has been murder done? I heard it on good authority, but could hardly believe my ears."

"It's quite true," said Wilfred curtly. He was strongly disposed to shut the door in his questioner's face.

"Mr. Dudden, so I was told?"

"Yes."

This time Wilfred did begin to close the door, but Mr. Parsons took an eager step forward and placed himself in the aperture.

"You must pardon this seeming intrusion. But I have information to give—valuable information. Indeed it is so."

"What information?"

"I saw the murderer—I am convinced I saw the murderer. Twenty minutes past nine—I remember the time precisely. I was looking out of my study window. A great hulking ruffian of a man—possi-

bly—I cannot be sure on this point—but possibly the worse for drink. He came through the front gate and slunk round the house towards the back in what I can only call a highly suspicious manner. Ten minutes later he reappeared and slunk out—positively slunk out. Oh! a highly suspicious character—known to the police, I do not doubt. Possibly a member of a gang.”

Wilfred wondered for a moment whether the whole story was a fabrication, but Mr. Parsons’ earnestness convinced him.

“Well,” he said, “I’ll mention it to the inspector. Thank you very much.”

“Not at all. It was my duty.”

“Quite so. By the way, Mr. Dudden went out at a quarter past nine. Did you happen to see his return?”

“No, I did not. I did not see him go out, either. Mr. Dudden has neither left the house nor returned to it this evening, I am sure of that. My study window, you know.”

“You may not have noticed.”

Mr. Parsons positively squeaked with indignation.

“I notice everything—everything! Nothing escapes me. I have trained myself to observe. Yes, I can assure you, I notice everything. I even noticed the light in the bathroom—most unusual at such an early hour.”

“I beg your pardon,” said Wilfred soothingly. “Most remarkable and, er—painstaking. Thank you very much. I’ll tell the Ellises.”

“If I could be of any assistance,” said Mr. Parsons eagerly.

“Oh, thanks,” said Wilfred. “But I don’t think there’s anything. The police, you know, they’re in charge and all that.”

He managed at last to shut the door.

He was somewhat startled by what Mr. Parsons had told him. After a moment’s reflection he went into the kitchen. Mrs. Hulk was alone there.

He began by asking her whether she knew at what hour Dudden had returned. Her answer was given tartly.

“I don’t know. How should I? Got a key, ‘e ‘ad.”

“He did go out, I suppose?”

“Of course he went out. Slammed the door fit to shake the ‘ouse. In a temper, if you arsk me. ‘E’d a narsty temper. I’ve seen it more than once.”

“Has anyone been to the house this evening?”

“What d’yer mean, been to the ‘ouse?”

"Well, it seems a man was seen coming round to the back door—a great hulking brute, I understand."

"What d'yer mean with yer narsty puns?"

"Puns? I don't understand you."

"Yer said 'hulking,' didn't yer? Oh! yes, it was Hulk right enough. Cadging round as usual. Half my week's wages, I 'ad to give him before he'd take 'imself off. A bit the worse, 'e was. And that's not unusual."

Wilfred soothed her by assuring her that no pun had been meant. That matter seemed cleared up satisfactorily.

Suddenly remembering Parsons' remark about the bathroom, on an impulse he ran up the stairs. The bathroom was situated just at the angle of the stairs. He pushed the door open and entered. There was nothing luxuriant or magnificent about the bathroom. It was small and rather dirty looking. The varnished paper was peeling off in one corner. Wilfred looked about him. Nothing here. Indeed, what should there be? He was just turning to depart when he noticed some dark spots on the linoleum in front of the wash-basin. He stooped, scrutinized them, then he touched one gingerly with his finger. His face grew rather white. *The spots on the floor were spots of blood.* . . . A voice spoke from the doorway. It was Mrs. Hulk. "You're wanted in the parlor." Wilfred descended the stairs mechanically, his mind busy. In the parlor the inspector was seated at a table. The doctor was standing near the window.

"Now, Mr. Hope, I should like a few words from you."

"Certainly. I don't know, though, that I can add very much to what you know already."

"We've had a full account from Mr. Ellis. It's not that so much. But there are one or two minor points where I think you may be able to assist us."

"Of course, if I can, I shall be only too glad."

"Thank you. For instance—this case—" He produced it suddenly, rather like a conjuror. "You recognize it—eh?"

"I—well, yes, of course, it's mine."

"A case of surgical instruments?"

"Yes."

"You brought it here—when?"

"Yesterday, I think. I must have forgotten it."

"Just so. Was it complete? Anything lost or missing from it?"

Wilfred stared at him in surprise.

"Certainly it was complete. It's practically brand-new."

"Nothing was missing? You're sure?"

"Quite sure."

"And yet—something *is* missing." The inspector opened the case. "*One of the surgical knives is missing, Mr. Hope.*"

Startled, Wilfred met the inspector's gaze fixed full upon him. What was there behind that glance? Was it—suspicion?

A feeling of deadly sickness surged over him.

Chapter III

by Dorothy L. Sayers

"A surgical knife missing?" stammered Wilfred. "Are—are you sure?"

For answer the inspector held out the case, open, showing the rows of shining steel instruments, each held neatly in place by a little leather girdle. There was a collection of scalpels, ranged side by side like needles in a needle case. The central one of the row was undoubtedly gone.

"Oh, *that*—" said Wilfred as airily as he could. "*That* knife. Oh, yes, I see. Well, now that I come to look at it I can't be *absolutely* sure about it, I know I have got the knife *somewhere*—it is not missing in that sense. But I could not swear that I did not leave it in the dissecting room. Or the man I dig with may have borrowed it. He is a terror for borrowing things. Er—I will have a hunt for it when I get home."

"Thank you, sir. That would be a great assistance. We do not want to waste time looking for a mare's nest, you know." Inspector Rice laughed cheerily, but to Wilfred the mirth had an ominous and sarcastic sound.

"Now, Mr. Hope, I understand you were the first person to examine the body, and you gave it as your opinion that he had been murdered. Yes. What made you so certain of that, Mr. Hope? The wound is in quite a possible position for suicide, you see. It is not as though he had been stabbed in the middle of the back, for instance."

"Of course not," replied Wilfred, conscious that the police surgeon was eyeing him with what seemed to him diabolical amusement. "Perhaps I spoke rather impulsively. The—er—direction of the stab, and the fact that there was no weapon to be seen—I think that was what was in my mind."

"That was all, was it? You had no reason for supposing that anybody might have a motive for murdering this Mr.—er—this Mr. Dudden?"

"Good Lord, no!" said Wilfred hastily.

"You yourself were on friendly terms with him?"

"I did not know him frightfully well," explained Wilfred. "We met as—as friendly acquaintances, you know."

"Just so. And you knew of no little differences between him and the household?"

Wilfred wondered very much what Mr. Ellis had been saying but replied, with more truth to the letter than to the spirit, "I never saw or heard anything pass of an unfriendly nature."

"Just so, just so," said the inspector. "All friends together. You are engaged to Miss Ellis, I believe?"

"Yes, I am," said Wilfred, a little defiantly.

"Ah, h'm. This must have been a sad shock to the young lady. Do you happen to know, sir, what were Mr. Dudden's feelings towards Miss Ellis?"

The question was slipped in so sharply and shrewdly that it nearly threw Wilfred off his guard. He took refuge in an embarrassed laugh.

"His feelings? Come now, inspector, he would not be likely to confide his feelings to *me*, would he? No doubt he admired Miss Ellis. I think everybody admires her."

"I am quite sure of that, sir," said the inspector, with cast-iron gravity. "Well now, Mr. Hope, you told Mr. Ellis that everything must be left just as it was and the police sent for? That was very right and proper. Mr. Ellis sent the telephone message, I think? Yes. Can you tell us where the rest of the family were at that time?"

"Miss Ellis felt unwell," said Wilfred, "and Mrs. Ellis took her upstairs. Robert stayed here with me."

"All the time?"

"No, not all the time. He went out. I do not know where he went."

"Did anybody else come in?"

"Mrs. Hulk, the cook, looked in for a moment, just before you came. She went out again to let you in."

"I see. First you and Mr. Robert—then you by yourself—then you and Mrs. Hulk. We were round in about ten minutes after getting the message, I think, doctor?—or say, a quarter of an hour. You would have been alone with the body for five or six minutes, then, Mr. Hope?"

"About that," agreed Wilfred. His tongue seemed dry, and the words did not come out very well. "I was the most suitable person to stay with it," he added. "I am a medical student, you see. A dead body is not so shocking to me as to other people."

"Exactly so, sir. Did you make any search for the weapon during these five or six minutes?"

"No. None. I just stood by. I touched nothing."

"I wish everybody showed as much common sense," said the inspector heartily. "Now, as regards the earlier part of the evening? You arrived about ten o'clock?"

"Yes. I was shown straight in here. The whole family was here together, and I am quite certain that nobody left their seat even for a moment until the body was discovered. Mrs. Ellis was reading—"

The inspector interrupted him.

"Just a moment." His eye had wandered to the doorway. "Who is that, please? Do you want anybody?"

A small figure came forward into the light, and Wilfred, with a sense of irritation, recognized the persistent Mr. Parsons.

"Oh, I *do* beg your pardon, inspector. I *hope* I'm not intruding. The front door was on the latch, so I just came in. I thought you might like to take my evidence yourself, though this young gentleman has doubtless told you all about it."

"He has not told us anything so far," said the inspector, fixing a questioning eye on Wilfred.

"I was just going to, inspector, only you didn't give me time," explained the young man hurriedly. "Though, as a matter of fact, I went at once to Mrs. Hulk and asked about it, and she cleared the whole thing up, so I really thought it was hardly worth bothering you about."

"I think that's for me to judge, sir, if you don't mind." The inspector turned to Mr. Parsons, who at once plunged happily and eagerly into his tale of the ruffian seen going round to the back door.

"H'm," said Inspector Rice, "it's a pity I didn't hear of this earlier!"

"Yes, but—" said Wilfred. He felt that he was making matters worse with every word, but he gave Mrs. Hulk's version of the matter, and went on:

"After all, inspector, I don't see that that could have had anything to do with it. The man was out of the house at half past nine, and if Dudden had been killed as early as that, the blood would have coagulated long before ten twenty-five, when I saw it still trickling

from behind the screen. Of course, this linoleum surround is waxed, and the floors uneven, which would help the blood to travel, and the room was very hot. Still, the floor is the coldest part of it, and you would expect the blood to clot in about fifteen minutes or so—that is to say—"He stopped, realizing rather too late where this display of medical science was leading him.

"Quite so," said the inspector with the air of one triumphantly snapping the spring of a trap, "but don't you see, sir, that that would bring the time of death to ten past ten. Now you tell me that you and all the family were here in this room from ten o'clock till ten twenty-five. How would you explain that?"

"Yes, I see," said Wilfred unhappily. "Well, I can't explain it. It must have been earlier—of course it must."

Dr. Larkin smiled.

"In any case," he said, "there is no need to assume that the man died immediately after the stabbing. A constant flow of warm blood would help retard the clotting."

"Of course it would," said Wilfred. The trap was not a real trap at all; it was a bluff. He reflected savagely that at least the inspector had gained nothing by it.

Mr. Parsons, meanwhile, was gazing at the body with frank interest.

"Dear, dear," he squeaked, "how very strange it seems. So large a man, and so small a wound—and yet it killed him—yes, yes. Death hath so many doors to let out life, as the poet observes. Not as wide as a church-door, but 'tis enough, 'twill serve. Shakespeare, you know. And no sign of any struggle. They thought him dying when he slept, and sleeping when he died. I forget who wrote that. Yes. Such a curious place for him to be in, isn't it? But he wasn't put there—he was sitting or standing there when he was stabbed, and just toppled right over—you can see that by the way the blood has run straight down without smearing. Really, I am quite a Sherlock Holmes, am I not? I suppose this splash on the screen was made when the blood first gushed out. What a pity! It has run through underneath and stained the nice carpet. I wonder why he was hiding behind the screen?"

"That's what we don't know yet," said the inspector.

"If he didn't die at once," said the little man, "why didn't he call out or try to crawl away? You *will* forgive my inquisitiveness, but it is all so interesting to me. I am such an observer. Nothing human is foreign to me, as Horace says—I think it is Horace, isn't it? Well,

well, well. He must have fallen asleep, don't you think, inspector? And slept very, very soundly."

The inspector and the doctor exchanged glances, and Wilfred wondered whether they too had noticed the strange contraction of the dead man's pupils.

"We shall know better about that," said Rice, "when we find out exactly when and how he got here."

"Well, now, I can help you there, inspector," cried Mr. Parsons in great excitement. "Dear me, I'm so glad I came along—I can be quite useful to you after all. Now that I've seen the body lying just close under the window like this, I can tell you that it can't possibly have been there before nine twenty-five. Wait—I'll tell you how I know, I happened to step out after dinner to put a letter in the pillar-box, just up the lane, and as I passed I noticed—I can't help noticing things—I noticed the lights go up in the room, and somebody drawing the curtains. I'm sure about the time because I looked at my watch to see if I had caught the nine thirty post, and my watch is always right because I set it by wireless time. So the poor fellow couldn't have been there at nine twenty-five or the person who drew the curtains would have noticed him, wouldn't they?"

"That may be important," said the inspector. "Who drew the curtains?"

"That would be Mrs. Hulk, I think," said Wilfred. "Shall I fetch her?"

"No, thank you, sir," said the inspector, civilly but firmly, "I think I'll go along and see her myself."

He marched away to the kitchen, leaving Mr. Parsons to babble his questions to the doctor. Wilfred followed him but, on the way, ran into Mrs. Ellis in the hall and stopped to inquire after Amy.

"Just fallen asleep, poor child," said her mother. "She's simply stunned by the blow. It's all come upon us so suddenly—I hardly know if I'm on my head or my heels. What ought we to do? Ought we to go into mourning? Mr. Dudden was no relation, of course, and—and—nobody liked him—but dying like this—in our house—oh, dear! I have a new black frock just coming home from the dress-maker's. Miss Pettigrew said she would bring it round tonight. I thought I might put it on, but I don't see it anywhere, do you? Mrs. Hulk would know whether it came or not. I must ask her."

"I don't think you'd better ask Mrs. Hulk just now," said Wilfred. "The inspector is interviewing her in the kitchen."

"Oh dear, is he?" Mrs. Ellis clasped her plump hands with a ges-

ture almost of despair. "What on earth can he want *her* for? Well, he shan't come disturbing Amy. I won't have it. I'd better go back to her."

She climbed the stairs heavily, with a new terror in her face.

In the meantime, Inspector Rice had elicited from Mrs. Hulk the story of her husband's cadging visit to the house and had passed on to his second question.

"I can't rightly remember when I drew the curtains," said Mrs. Hulk thoughtfully. She paused in her occupation of slicing beef for the stock pot and rested the knife point downwards on the table while she overhauled her memory. "It would be later than usual, owing to supper being put off. If the gentleman says it was five-and-twenty past, then I won't say any different."

"If Mr. Dudden had been sitting, or lying, behind the screen at the time, would you have noticed him?"

"Well, now—" Mrs. Hulk looked frankly into the inspector's eyes—"that I couldn't say neither. I might, and then again I might not. You see, when the light is on, it throws a heavy shadder be'ind that there screen as you'll 'ave noticed for yourself."

"In point of fact, though, you did *not* see him?"

"No. No-o-o. No, I didn't see him." She considered again. "But come to think of it, I believe I did 'ear a sort of a 'eavy breathing, like. But I didn't pay no attention to that, puttin' it down to old Grip."

"Grip?"

"The bulldog," explained Mrs. Hulk. "'E often breathes 'eavy, on account of his nose bein' flat. Regular snorin', you'd call it."

"I see," said the inspector, mentally noting that he would have to investigate Grip's movements as well as those of the family. "Very well, Mrs. Hulk. Now, where is this bathroom I've been hearing about?"

"Right at the top of the stairs, sir. You can't miss it. You can see the door from the 'all."

Mr. Parsons was already twittering upon the landing, and Wilfred had accompanied him upstairs, partly because he did not trust Mr. Parsons, and partly because he wanted to see what the inspector would make of the bloodstains on the bathroom floor. But when the door was opened, he saw that they had come too late. The spots were gone. Not very long gone, either, for the floor bore traces of recent washing—a fact which did not escape the official eye.

"Looks as though someone had been wiping up something," said Inspector Rice. "Who did that?"

"Perhaps this gentleman could tell you," suggested Mr. Parsons a trifle maliciously. "When I came in just now to see you, inspector, I noticed him coming out of this door."

"This is monstrous," said Wilfred, feeling that if murders were going to be the fashion, he would gladly wring Mr. Parsons' scraggy neck. "I never touched the bathroom floor. I had nothing to do with it at all."

The inspector said nothing. He was examining a little row of bottles above the fixed basin—*aspirin* tablets, tooth powder, health salts, ammoniated quinine, and similar household trifles. Then a second door caught his attention. He opened it, disclosing a large cupboard crammed with more bottles, boxes, boots, books, rugs, tins, discarded ornaments and picture frames—in fact, a regular family "glory-hole." He rummaged about, grunting, for some time and finally emerged with a small, flat, black-japanned case in his hands.

It was the kind of case that was issued to medical officers during the war, containing various kinds of drugs, many of them deadly, in small, closely-stoppered glass tubes. Most of these appeared to be still intact. One of them, however, the inspector held up. It was plainly labeled *MORPHINE*, and about half its contents were gone.

The inspector's face was somewhat stern as he departed to interview Mr. Ellis. He found him still seated in the dining room with Grip snuffling beside his chair. Mr. Ellis said at once, yes, the case was his. He had "scrounged" it from some stores during the war. Oh yes, everybody knew of its existence, but he didn't think it had been taken out of the cupboard for years. If the inspector said it seemed to have been recently dusted, he could only suppose that someone had been tidying up the bathroom. Mrs. Hulk would know. None of the drugs had ever been used, as far as he knew.

The inspector drew his attention to the missing morphine tablets. Mr. Ellis changed color and seemed to grow even smaller and more crumpled than before.

"Oh," said he uncomfortably, "yes, wait a minute. I believe I did once use a few of them—ages ago—to—to—poison a dog, you know."

"Why, what dog was that?" asked Mr. Parsons, who had attached himself firmly to the inspector and could not be shaken off. "I never knew you had any dog but Grip, and we've been neighbors ever

since the war. Fancy you having another dog and me not noticing! And I pride myself upon noticing everything!"

"It wasn't my dog," said Mr. Ellis, rather unconvincingly. "Er—it was a friend's dog. A Pekinese," he added, by way of corroborative detail. "It had canker of the ear, poor creature."

"Well, I must detain the case," said the inspector, wrapping it up carefully and slipping it into a handbag. "It will have to go to headquarters to be tested for fingerprints."

"But the man was not poisoned, was he, inspector?" said Mr. Ellis, bewildered.

"I cannot say definitely till after the autopsy," said the inspector. "And now I should like a word with Mr. Robert Ellis."

Robert, it appeared, had gone to his bedroom, but when summoned by Wilfred, he came down in his shirtsleeves. Wilfred, remembering his embarrassed actions earlier in the evening, looked narrowly at his cuffs. They were none too clean, certainly, but the spots on them were undoubtedly ordinary black ink, which he made no effort to hide.

Robert could not help the inspector at all. He knew nothing, and had thought Dudden had gone out to his club until the dreadful moment when the body was discovered. The sight of blood always made him feel very sick—he was sensitive that way—and he had simply *had* to bolt upstairs and lie down. He certainly looked horribly white and ill, and the inspector mercifully released him.

"Well now," said Inspector Rice when Dr. Larkin had gone, reluctantly followed by Mr. Parsons, "it seems as though there might be some unpleasant characters hanging about the place. I think it will be better if I stay here tonight. No need to put Mrs. Ellis about. Any old shakedown will do for me. Then I shall be handy in case I am wanted."

It struck Wilfred that none of the family seemed to want the inspector particularly, but nobody made any protest. They talked in dismal whispers till the inspector returned from making a telephone call.

"That's all right," said Rice cheerfully, "we shall be sending for the body later on. You will all feel more comfortable when that is out of the way."

"Can I go home?" asked Wilfred rather uncertainly.

"By all means," said the inspector. "You will let me have your address? I may want to see you again in the morning."

Wilfred gave the address, bade a subdued goodnight to Mr. and

Mrs. Ellis, and stumbled drearily out. It might have been his fancy, but he felt that somebody or something was moving stealthily after him through the rain and the darkness, all the way to his lodgings.

Mr. Parsons had gone home but not to bed. He remained at his front gate, smoking and observing, long after the street was quiet. He saw the lights in the Ellises' house go out—all except one on the first floor, which he took to be Amy's, and one in the sitting room, where Inspector Rice kept vigil.

About one o'clock a dismal van drove up to the little gate. Four men emerged from it with a stretcher. They went up to the house and were let in. Presently the door opened again. A gloomy burden, swathed in black, was carried out and put in the van. The engine was started up, and the van moved away.

Mr. Parsons still stood at the gate. He thought he noticed something stirring beneath the laburnums which dripped and swung over the garden wall. At length a dark shape detached itself and sidled up to him.

"Say, mister, that was the police, wasn't it? 'As he bin an' gorn an' done it?"

"Has who done what?" said Mr. Parsons, startled.

"Mr. Robert. 'As 'e bin an' gorn and done 'isself in?"

"Why?" said Mr. Parsons. "What makes you think that? What do you know about it?"

"Me? Nuffin', mister. I knows nuffin', s'welp me. But see 'ere. Ef yer seein' 'er—Mrs. Ellis—jest you say to 'er, it wasn't my fault. 'E never come. She'll understand. Jest you say that. *E never come.*"

Chapter IV

IN THE ASPIDISTRA

by Anthony Berkeley

Detective Inspector Rice had no intention of spending that night in sleep. Other people, however, must not know that. It was therefore with some care that the inspector walked upstairs at a quarter past one with his heaviest tread and closed his bedroom door in the most convincing way. Then he sat down on the only chair in the room and prepared for an hour's really hard thinking.

From the notes he made from time to time, it seemed that Inspector Rice did most of his thinking in questions:

Is it an outside or an inside job?

How could it possibly be an outside one?

Are the family telling all they know?

Are they shielding one of themselves?

That fellow Hope, now—

Why wouldn't Miss Ellis see me, *really*?

Who washed the bathroom floor?

Why was Mrs. Hulk cutting up beef so late?

The inspector looked at his last entry, scratched his head, and then underlined the words in heavy black lead.

He glanced at his watch. It was nearly twenty minutes to two.

He began to make out a rough timetable of events, searching back among the pages of his notebook with a large thumb.

9:15 P.M. Dudden leaves table. Front door bangs.

9:20 P.M. Hulk seen going to back door.

9:25 P.M. Mrs. Hulk draws parlor curtains.

9:28 P.M. Family enters parlor.

9:30 P.M. Hulk seen to leave.

10:00 P.M. Hope arrives.

The inspector's forehead was furrowed as he studied what he had written. The difficulty was obvious. Assuming that Mrs. Hulk had not practically stumbled over the body without seeing it, the timetable gave exactly three minutes for Dudden to have been stabbed and stowed away behind the screen. That was possible perhaps, but was it probable? In other words, was the timetable reliable?

The inspector took a lick at his pencil stub and rapidly added three more questions to his list:

Where was Dudden between 9:15 and 9:28?

Is Mrs. Ellis speaking the truth, that no one else left the dining room alone?

Are any of them speaking the truth?

He thought for a moment and then wrote down, in despairing capitals, one last sentence:

Are they all in on it?

As if nothing could improve upon that, he shut his notebook with a snap and leaned back in his chair, his hands deep in his pockets. Independent witnesses—that was what he wanted, and except for

that funny little know-all next door, Parsons, there wasn't a single one.

An idea came to him. What was that about a dressmaker coming round that evening? Had she come or hadn't she? He could not remember. But if she had, she might have seen something. He must look into that tomorrow. Another idea: the probabilities all pointed to death's having occurred after ten o'clock. Hope had arrived at ten o'clock. Was this significant or not? To be so there must be some connection, and a very close connection, between the medical student and Dudden, the City man.

Out came the notebook again, and one last entry was made: Hope—Amy Ellis—Dudden. Query, connection here?

He rose to his feet, opened his bedroom door, listened without moving for at least a minute, and then crept noiselessly in the darkness down the stairs, the position of which he had carefully memorized. He was going to search, unhindered, for that knife. The time passed quickly. By a quarter past two he had searched the parlor; by half past two the kitchen. The knife remained unfound. He was about to pass into the scullery when a sound overhead brought him up stock still. Somebody was shuffling down the stairs. In three silent strides Inspector Rice had reached the kitchen light and snapped it out; in five more he was in the scullery with the door into the kitchen half closed, for the steps, reaching the hall, had turned unmistakably in the direction of the kitchen. The next instant the door from the hall opened, softly closed again, and the electric light sprang on. With an eye glued to the crack of the scullery door Inspector Rice watched the intruder.

It was Robert Ellis. He was in pajamas, his feet bare, and it was plain that he was very, very frightened. In one hand he held, tightly grasped, a small bundle. He hesitated just inside the door, listening, and then hurried towards the stove. But before he could fulfill his obvious intention of thrusting the bundle down among the embers, the inspector had hurried forward and relieved him of it.

"Thank you, Mr. Ellis," he said pleasantly. "I think perhaps I had better take charge of this." He shook it out. It was a cotton shirt, and the inspector noticed with interest that the cuffs were stained with blood. "How do you account for this?" he asked sternly, pointing to the bloodstains.

For a moment Robert seemed unable to reply. His face was chalky, his whole body trembling so violently that his teeth chattered. Then suddenly he found his voice. "I—I got it touching *him*,"

he cried, half hysterically. "Before you came. When we were looking to—to see if he was dead. That's how."

"Then why did you want to burn it?"

"Because it makes me ill. Blood does. I can't stand it. Makes me feel sick. Horrible! I wouldn't wear that shirt again, not for a thousand pounds. Only thing to do was to burn it. I tell you, blood makes me ill." His voice dropped to a whimper. "What else could I do but burn it?"

"I see," said the inspector quietly, contemplating the pitiable figure. "Well, you'd better get up to bed again, my lad. Catch a cold with those bare feet if you're not careful."

Astonished, apparently, that he was not to be arrested, tried, sentenced, and hanged on the spot, Robert gaped, then grinned feebly and scuttled away. The inspector tenderly rolled up the shirt again. So it was that young ninny after all, was it? ran his thoughts. I wouldn't have thought he'd got it in him. No wonder they were all lying their heads off. Well, it shouldn't be difficult to fix it on him now. This shirt's a real bit of luck.

If it were, it was the only bit of luck the inspector had that night, for when, two hours later, he composed himself disgustedly on two chairs in the parlor, the door wide open, for two or three hours' very light sleep, the knife still remained elusive. Inspector Rice never doubted that the missing knife was the weapon with which the crime had been committed.

A light tapping on the window outside, just before half past seven, roused him instantly. Mr. Parsons was peering through the glass; on seeing the inspector approach, he beckoned urgently. In the clear, early morning light he looked more mottled than ever.

Stifling a rude word, Inspector Rice threw up the window. "Now, sir, I really cannot allow you to—"

"I've got news, inspector," broke in Mr. Parsons in a whisper squeaky with excitement. "Positively the most important news. I knew I should find you on the scene of the crime. Instinctively! I'm like that. You remember my suggestion that this man Hulk might be a member of some gang? I was right. I'm positive I was right. And, inspector—Mrs. Ellis is in it, too. Listen! Last night, after—"

"One moment, sir," interrupted the patient inspector. "If you have anything to tell me, may I come over to your own house? We shan't be overheard there."

"Of course! Certainly! I shall be delighted," twittered the little

man. "I'll go and open the front door at once. This very minute!" He hurried off down the path.

Outside the inspector beckoned to the constable stationed in front of the house. "Take charge, Benson. Don't let anyone into the parlor. If I'm wanted, I shall be next door."

He followed Mr. Parsons into Swallow-cliffe.

It was nearly half an hour before the inspector had succeeded in getting the full story of Hulk's mysterious second visit, and he then asked leave to use the telephone. Mr. Parsons accorded it with enthusiasm both for this occasion and any future one; he seemed on the point of putting his whole house and belongings at Inspector Rice's disposal. Perhaps he considered this sufficient justification for standing shamelessly by while the inspector telephoned.

"Is that Sergeant Farrar? Inspector Rice speaking. Take this down, Farrar, please." The inspector gave as good a description of Hulk as Mr. Parsons had been able to offer. "Yes, I want that man pulled in and held till I've seen him. Have that description circulated to all stations. Is Sergeant Hall there? No? Well, get on to him and ask him to come up here at once. That's all. No—wait a minute. Have headquarters sent the copies of those fingerprints on that black-japanned case that I sent up for examination last night? Well, send them along to me as soon as they come in, please. Yes, here." Mr. Parsons almost danced with excitement. Fingerprints! This was the real thing.

The inspector stood for a moment, thinking deeply and quite oblivious of the human question mark that was gyrating round him. Then he took up the receiver again and gave another number. It was the police surgeon's, but Mr. Parsons did not know that.

"Sorry to bother you so early, sir, but I'm particularly anxious to get an idea of what your report's going to be. By the way," added the inspector cautiously, "I'm speaking from a rather public place, you understand."

There was a chuckle at the other end of the wire. "I get you. Some busybody listening, eh? Well, inspector, I've only made a hurried autopsy, but I've sponged the wound and it seems quite straightforward. The murderer (if it was murder, and I don't think there's much doubt about that) had two attempts; the first was a shallow, slicing cut which nicked a small artery but didn't do much damage otherwise; the second a straight stab, almost in the line of the first. That's the one that caused death. The man wouldn't have died at once, though; he must have bled to death quite slowly."

"Oh!" said the inspector.

"As to the other thing—mind, I can't say anything definite yet, but I'm pretty sure the hint I gave you was right; the man was certainly suffering from some form of narcotic poisoning when he died. Not necessarily enough to cause death (I can't tell you that yet), but in any case quite a hefty dose."

"Ah!" said the inspector.

"And that's really all I can tell you at present."

"Thank you, sir," said the inspector and rang off.

"Inspector," bubbled Mr. Parsons, "you must stay and have some breakfast now. Positively you must. I insist. My wife and I . . . the greatest pleasure."

"Well, that's very kind of you, sir," replied the inspector genially. "I could do with a bite of breakfast, and that's a fact." He would have to listen to some very tedious palaver, but there might be a grain or two of real information amongst the dross. And anyhow the inspector wanted his breakfast.

He ate two fried eggs and made the acquaintance of Mrs. Parsons, a subdued little woman who looked at him timidly and said very little, but when he returned next door, just after nine o'clock, it was with nothing of any value (beyond the two fried eggs) to compensate for the delay.

The family, he learned from the constable, were just finishing their breakfast. Miss Ellis was still in bed and could see no one. "Is that so?" said the inspector.

In the drawing room Sergeant Hall was waiting for him.

"Morning, sergeant. Got a ticklish job for you. I want the prints of everyone in this house, and I don't want them to know you've taken them. Manage it?"

The sergeant grinned acquiescence and went out. Inspector Rice settled himself in a chair and began to enter up in his notebook the facts he had learned this morning. There was a tap at the door and the constable came into the room; he closed the door behind him before he spoke. "That dressmaker's here, sir. Miss Pettigrew. I thought you might like to know. I heard the cook saying she came here last night and fancied you might want to see her."

The inspector nodded approval. "That's right. Where is she?"

The constable jerked his thumb over his shoulder and slightly opened the door. The sound trickled into the room of a thin, watery little voice, extremely refined " . . . so I thought you wouldn't want to be bothered so late and took it away again. I don't know whether

I've acted as you'd wish, Mrs. Ellis, but as soon as I saw the dreadful news in the papers, I said to myself, now a black dress is just what Mrs. Ellis will be wanting, so I hurried round and . . ."

"The truth being," observed the inspector humorously as he went out, "that as soon as she saw the dreadful news in the papers she couldn't rest till she'd got both feet in the house. They're all alike."

"That's right, sir," beamed the constable, much gratified at being the recipient of an inspectorial jest.

Firmly the inspector detached Miss Pettigrew from Mrs. Ellis and led her into the drawing room. She was a tall, faded woman of about forty with tired eyes, a thin, very pink nose, and wearing an indeterminate hat and grey cotton gloves. The forthcoming interview was plainly a most unexpected development of the simple curiosity which the inspector had imputed to her, for in spite of every effort to restrain them her hands were trembling visibly. Inspector Rice had no difficulty in placing her as one of that type to whom any dealings with the police, however innocent, are "not quite nice."

With such, tact is needed. The inspector proceeded to apply it. With ceremony he ushered Miss Pettigrew into a chair, in deferential tones he apologized for the inconvenience to herself, confidentially he hinted that Miss Pettigrew's assistance was the very thing for which the police had been desperately longing and were prepared almost to go down on their knees to obtain. "So I'm sure you won't mind if I ask you just one or two questions?" he said unctuously.

"Not at all," replied Miss Pettigrew in prim, if rather quavery, tones, sitting on the extreme edge of the most uncomfortable chair in the room.

With the same confidential air, the inspector proceeded to put his questions, and Miss Pettigrew gradually responded to the treatment. Her hands ceased to tremble; her voice lost its quaver; her long thin nose grew even a little pinker with gratification. Certainly she would assist the course of justice if she could. Of course she would tell all she knew. Miss Pettigrew became almost animated.

She had come to the back door last night, then, at—well, it must have been just about ten minutes past nine. Anyhow, Mrs. Hulk would know. The family were at supper, so Mrs. Hulk had shown her into the hall to wait. Mrs. Hulk had been—well, perhaps, yes a little *queer*, Miss Pettigrew had thought. She had waited in the hall about ten minutes and then, feeling sure Mrs. Ellis would not want to be bothered so late, had let herself out of the front door.

The inspector was almost rubbing his hands with delight. This was really too good to be true. He questioned Miss Pettigrew further, with difficulty concealing his eagerness. Yes, Miss Pettigrew had been at the far end of the hall, in the shadow. Yes, certainly she had seen Mr. Dudden come out of the dining room.

"And what did he do?"

It had seemed to Miss Pettigrew, even then, that Mr. Dudden was behaving very strangely. In fact, had she not known the household so well she would have thought—it was a terrible thing to say, but she really would have thought he was *drunk*. He had seemed almost to *reel*, instead of walk. And before going into the drawing room he had opened the front door and then simply *slammed* it. Most odd!

"Yes, yes," gloated the inspector. "He went into the drawing room. And then who followed him out from the dining room?"

Miss Pettigrew looked startled. "Who followed him? Pardon me, I don't quite understand. Nobody followed him."

"Well, who came out next? During the next five minutes if you like."

"Indeed, nobody else came out of the dining room at all."

"What?" said the inspector incredulously. "Not all the time you were waiting? Oh, come, miss, please."

Miss Pettigrew began to tremble again. "Do you—do you insinuate that I am not speaking the truth?"

The inspector hastened to reassure her, but it was no use; though mollified, Miss Pettigrew could not say, even to oblige the inspector, that anyone else had followed Mr. Dudden from the dining room for the simple reason that nobody had.

"Not even Robert Ellis?" blurted out the inspector at last.

"Certainly not," replied Miss Pettigrew in tones of high offense at this fresh insinuation.

The inspector had to let her go. He did so ruefully. From being too good to be true, Miss Pettigrew had become too bad. This seemed almost to let Robert Ellis out altogether. But did it, though? The inspector walked round behind the screen. That window, now . . .

A tap at the door interrupted his thoughts. Sergeant Hall came into the room. He wore an air of triumph. "Quite a lot of news come through in a rush, sir. First, I've got all those prints for you."

"Ah!" said the inspector. He did not waste time asking how this difficult task had been effected; that was taken for granted.

"And a photograph of those prints on the japed medicine case

has come through from headquarters. They're the girl's all right—Amy Ellis. Not a shadow of a doubt."

"Ah!" said the inspector again. The news did not seem to surprise him very much. "Anything else?"

"Yes, they've got Hulk. Down at Wapping. They're holding him for you, but they've taken his story themselves, to save time. This is what he says." Sergeant Hill gave the story concisely. Hulk had admitted to having accepted money from Mrs. Ellis to lie in wait for Dudden the previous evening, knock him out, and get possession of his pocketbook. He did not know why the pocketbook was wanted. Not for the money in it, he was sure; he had gathered that it contained some paper or other which Mrs. Ellis was desperately anxious to obtain.

"Phew!" whistled the inspector. "What's all this about? I've been through that pocketbook myself. There's no paper of *that* sort in it."

"It all hangs together, sir," Sergeant Hall countered triumphantly. "Merriman telephoned through immediately afterwards." Detective Constable Merriman had been detailed to go down to Dudden's office in the City first thing that morning and make a preliminary examination of his possessions there. "I didn't interrupt you because he's on his way here now. He says he found nothing of interest, papers all in order and all that, *except*—in an envelope in Dudden's office safe there's a check for a hundred and fifty pounds marked 'Signature Differs' and a signed confession by Robert Ellis that the check's a forgery executed by himself." Sergeant Hall's broad smile indicated that in his opinion the case was as good as ended.

The inspector seemed to agree. "Right! That about clinches it, weapon or no weapon. We'll have Master Robert Ellis on the mat, I think, sergeant. Bring him along, and then stand by."

As the sergeant went out, Inspector Rice called the constable in from the hall. "Telephone to Sergeant Farrar to get a warrant made out, Benson," he said in a low voice. "Name, Robert Ellis; charge, murder. Not from here. Better go next door."

The constable nodded and disappeared. A moment later Sergeant Hall came into view, half dragging and half driving the pimply youth through the doorway.

Inspector Rice confronted his victim from the hearthrug. "Now then, Ellis, you'd better tell us all about it," he said sternly. "It'll be better for you in the end. Come along."

"I don't know what you mean," Robert almost shrieked. "I haven't anything to tell. Damn you, let me go upstairs!"

"Don't you take that tone, my lad. Nothing to tell, eh? That's pretty good. What about that check of Dudden's you forged? What about that confession you wrote out? Come along, now—what have you done with that knife?"

The inspector paused. He had purposely adopted a bullying tone as the best means of countering the youth's incipient hysteria. But there was no need to continue it. The news of the discovery of the forged check seemed to have knocked out what little anemic stuffing there had been in Robert. He had tumbled into the nearest chair and sat there, twitching and shivering, his pimply forehead glistening in panic. To the inspector's practiced eye he was obviously on the point of confession. "I—I—I," he mouthed.

"There is no need for you to bully my son, inspector," said a quiet but rather shaky voice from the door.

The inspector wheeled round angrily. "Madam, I really must ask you to remain outside. I said that—"

"And I said there was no need for you to bully my son," interposed Mrs. Ellis calmly. "I'm quite ready to tell you the truth. I killed Mr. Dudden."

His anger forgotten, the inspector stared at her in astonishment. The confession had taken him completely by surprise. And yet it was reasonable enough. That story of Hulk's . . .

He became aware of Constable Benson beckoning eagerly from the doorway and went out mechanically. Constable Benson seemed extremely pleased with himself. With pride he displayed to the inspector's gaze, holding it carefully by the edges, a bloodstained surgical knife. "Fancy this is what you've been looking for, isn't it, sir? Thought I might as well have a look round next door when I'd done telephoning, and I found this—well, it was hid away in Mr. Parsons' aspidistra, sir."

Chapter V

by E. C. Bentley

Inspector Rice whistled gently and expressively as he drew out his handkerchief and motioned to the constable to lay the knife upon it. Carrying the bloodstained instrument thus on his open right

hand he turned to reenter the drawing room. "You want me?" inquired Sergeant Hall, who had observed this unexpected development with a gleam in his hard blue eye. "Of course," the inspector said. "Things are beginning to happen quite rapidly, sergeant. You—" to the gratified Constable Benson—"stand by this door."

Carrying the knife ostentatiously displayed, the inspector entered the room, followed by his satellite, and walked to the table where the open case of instruments lay. He was not disappointed of his effect. Mrs. Ellis shrieked and covered her face with her hands; her son, with a choking gasp, sprang from his chair and then collapsed into it again, shuddering violently. "It's the missing knife right enough," the inspector observed as he compared it with those in the case. He walked with the sergeant to the window, where with backs turned to the mother and son they spoke in low tones. "You've got your fingerprint doings here?" the inspector asked. "In the next room," was the answer. "That's right; and you've got the prints of the household. Take this weapon and report as soon as you've finished testing." The sergeant received his charge with delicate fingers. "One or two pretty good impressions visible to start with," he murmured. "Done with bloody fingers, those are. And—" he held the knife to the light at an angle—"there are others, I can see; they should be easily brought out."

At a slight sound from behind them Inspector Rice whipped round. "You stay here, my lad," he barked sharply, "and keep away from those knives"—as the wretched Robert, taking his hand from the door handle, turned unsteadily in the direction of the open case. As he fell into his chair again, his mother went to him and laid a hand on his shoulder.

"You have no right to speak to my son like that," she cried violently. "He has done nothing wrong."

"He looks like it," the inspector remarked harshly. "All right, sergeant, go to it. Now, madam—" as his subordinate went out—"will you repeat to me the very surprising statement you made a few minutes ago?"

"I told you that I killed him," Mrs. Ellis said, clasping her trembling hands together. "I killed him. And I won't say another word. You can arrest me now."

The inspector stroked his chin. This was not turning out so easily. Had she, after all, done it? As a confession, her statement was suspicious to a degree. He knew already—assuming Hulk's story to be true—that for her son's sake the old lady was prepared to go to

pretty desperate lengths. This was, he thought, a case in which a little low cunning would be in order.

"But surely," he said slowly, "you might at least tell me—"

Mrs. Ellis shook her head obstinately. "Not another word. I won't be trapped."

Inspector Rice's expression brightened. Here was a person demanding to be sent to the scaffold; and refusing to be trapped. Such simplicity, he thought, was all too rare. "But," he said, "your confession, Mrs. Ellis, is really very difficult to believe."

"I killed him," she repeated dully.

"You really mean to tell me—" here the inspector made use of a wagging forefinger—"that you turned on this man—a man with whom you had been on a friendly footing for years—that you took a knife and stabbed him to the heart?"

"Yes, I do say so," she replied sharply. "And I'll say nothing more."

The inspector shook his head. "You need say nothing more, ma'am," he observed more gently. "You have just said all that is necessary. And now—" he turned swiftly upon Robert Ellis—"what about your having done nothing wrong? You agree with your mother about that, do you?"

For the first time since the inspector had seen him the young man had pulled himself together. He stood up now, white and calm. "You sneering swine," he said, "you know I'm guilty, I believe. Anyhow, you needn't think I was going to let my mother take my place, even if you had believed her. I am through. I murdered Dudden, I never meant to do it, but I did it."

Mrs. Ellis clutched the inspector's arm. "It's a falsehood," she gasped. "You can't believe him. He's saying it to shield me. I tell you it was I—"

"It isn't any use, Mother," the young man said wearily. "I'm rotten, I know, but there are some things I can't do. I am going to tell the whole thing; I've made up my mind, and I feel better now than I've felt any time since it happened. We all had our reasons for hating Dudden. We all knew he was pestering Amy to marry him, though she was as good as engaged to Wilfred Hope. The very night when it happened, Father was going to tell him he must go, but Dudden had lent him money and was certain to be nasty about it, the bullying brute. As for me, you've found out what I had done, it seems."

Inspector Rice produced his notebook. "If you wish to make a con-

fession," he said formally, "I am ready to take down in shorthand what you say, and to make a copy for you to read through and sign."

It was a wretched story that the young man told while his mother sat weeping hopelessly beside him. He had been betting—he had had losses far heavier than he could meet; he was being pressed mercilessly for payment, was sure of losing his position if the facts became known. He knew that Dudden kept a checkbook in his room, and the crazy scheme of forgery came into his mind. He had stolen a check and forged Dudden's name; at the bank the fraud had been detected at once; payment had been refused and the check retained.

When Dudden received the forged check from his bankers, he had jumped immediately to a right conclusion as to the identity of the forger. Robert had intended, if his plan failed, to deny everything to the last and to count on Dudden's unwillingness to proceed to extremes against the brother of the girl whom he desired to marry. But he was now to discover that the man was capable of baseness greater than his own. Dudden had taxed him with the crime and had soon bullied and threatened the spineless youth into a complete surrender. Dudden had then laid down his terms. No more would be said about the forgery if Robert would hand to Dudden his written confession and would use his influence with Amy in favor of Dudden's proposal of marriage. How could he possibly influence his sister's decision in such a matter? Dudden, asked this question, had laughed brutally and said that that was Robert's business; that it ought not to take him long to think of a way to persuade his sister. Anyhow, there the proposition was. On the day of Dudden's marriage to Amy, the confession and the check would be returned to Robert; if Amy's consent was not forthcoming within a fortnight, both documents would be handed to the police.

Robert, cornered and helpless, had at last agreed to this. Then, seeing, as Dudden had so clearly seen, that Amy would be moved by nothing short of knowing the whole disgraceful story, he had told her everything. What followed was to have been foreseen. Amy, again and again, had pleaded desperately with Dudden to have mercy on her brother and herself; he had been quite unmoved and had demanded her final decision by a certain evening—the evening of the murder. What Amy had intended then to say or to do, Robert did not know. She had steadfastly refused to tell him what was in her mind.

When, at dinner that evening, Dudden had left the company ear-

ly, saying that he was going out, the half frantic Robert had risen also on an impulse and followed him from the room. He had seen Dudden open and close the front door and then enter the drawing room; he had guessed that Amy was shortly to join Dudden for the final interview before her parents left the table. Robert, hardly knowing what he did, had hastily taken a knife from Wilfred's case where it lay on the hall table; some vague idea of threatening Dudden was in his disordered thoughts as he followed his torturer into the empty room.

What Robert now told the inspector caused that officer to glance up from his stenography with a look of the liveliest interest. Dudden, when confronted by the young man in the drawing room and assailed with wild words, had acted very strangely. Instead of taking at once to his usual bullying tone, he had stood silent, leaning on a chair with eyes half closed and apparently paying not the slightest attention to Robert's words, or even to his presence. Robert, taking this for a show of contemptuous indifference, had then lost all control of his emotions. He had leaped at the man, aiming a blow at his throat, and at that moment Dudden had staggered, so that the knife struck him on the side of the neck. It had not, Robert felt, been a deep wound, but there had been a spurting of blood over his hands, and Dudden had fallen first on his knees, and then at full length, on the spot where the body was afterwards found.

"Wait a minute," put in the inspector. "There was a strong spurt of blood, was there? Do you happen to know—I have a reason for asking—whether Mr. Dudden was a man who bled very easily?"

Robert looked puzzled. "I—I do not know. I think . . . no, I do not know."

"All right; never mind. Go on."

Robert, appalled at what he had done, had then rushed from the room and hurried at once to the bathroom to wash the blood from his hands, on a desperate impulse of concealment. He had found then, to his further dismay, that there were bloodstains on the cuffs of his shirt, but he dared not take the time to change the garment. He had hastened downstairs again and taken his seat in the drawing room until his parents and his sister came and joined him there.

It was at this point in Robert's narrative that Inspector Rice looked up to put a question. "Then you put up the screen in front of the body," he said, "before the others came into the room."

The young man shook his head. "I never touched the screen at all," he declared. "It was there all the time. Dudden was behind it, leaning on a chair, when I went up to him. There was plenty of space behind the screen."

"We'll see just how it was," the inspector said, and he lifted the screen from the place where it now rested against the wall. Assisted now by Robert, he set it up as it had been when he was first called to the scene of the crime, and in this Inspector Rice had a certain purpose. For he had been struck by a curious discrepancy in the account that the young man had given of what took place. The officer's professional experience assured him that what he had been hearing was the truth, and yet—

"You have said everything that happened when the man was killed?" he inquired. "It will be best to get it absolutely right, you know."

Robert protested that he had omitted nothing. He had no objection to showing exactly how the thing had happened. The inspector standing as the murdered man had stood, Robert demonstrated precisely how and where he had struck the blow. It was evident to Inspector Rice that there was something very queer about the whole affair as it was now presented; queer in more than one respect.

And yet the confessed murderer was telling what he had done exactly as it had happened. Rice was convinced of that. The young man's whole demeanor showed it; from a cringing poltroon he had changed to a man—not a particularly admirable sort of man, but at least a man with the kind of moral strength which comes of making a clean breast of it and facing the music. The inspector had seen that phenomenon often enough to be able to recognize it infallibly. It could not be acted, and even if it could, Robert Ellis emphatically was not the sort who could act it.

But if it simply was not possible to accept Robert's story of the affair as accounting for all the very puzzling and sinister facts known to him, in what direction was he to look for light?

The inspector told himself reproachfully that there was one very obvious direction that he had been overlooking. It could not be doubted that Robert had been telling that truth. But what about the whole truth? If any other persons had any hand in the affair, it was by no means out of the question that Robert Ellis knew something about it. And Inspector Rice had to know. As things stood, he was far—very far—from having a clean case.

He decided to draw a bow at a venture.

"What you have told me, then," he said, "is the full extent of your confession to the murder of Paul Dudden? I have got down everything as it happened?"

Robert showed a little uneasiness at the pointed questioning. "Yes," he said, "that's right."

"Quite sure?" And at this pressing the young man's uncertain self-control failed utterly. "Sure—yes," he stammered. "There—there was nobody else."

"But I didn't suggest, you know, that there was anybody else," the inspector pointed out. There was a pause, Robert glaring mutely at his interrogator and evidently resolved to say no more. Inspector Rice at length said in his most persuasive tone, "You must understand that there is other evidence, I may say, and that it tends to incriminate other members of this household." And as Robert remained silent, the inspector added slowly, "Come, I think I understand, and I don't say that it doesn't do you credit. But if she was—"

"What I have told you is God's truth," Robert broke out fiercely. "I tell you that when I did it she—nobody else was here."

This was quite enough for Inspector Rice. Opening the door, he signed to the waiting constable without. "Let Miss Ellis know," he said, "that I wish to see her, and that it is important that no more time should be lost."

Mrs. Ellis, who still sat weeping quietly in the background, had heard all this with signs of renewed agitation. "He can't bring Amy into it," she wailed. "He can't have anything against Amy. Oh dear, isn't it enough to have one of them taken away from me?"

Her lamentations ceased suddenly as her daughter appeared with unexpected promptitude in the doorway. Amy had evidently overcome the emotions which were understood to have prostrated her so completely. She was pale and worn, but she had an air of composure and even of determination, and without so much as a glance at Inspector Rice she turned a look of inquiry on her brother.

"It's all over," Robert said in answer to her unspoken question. "I've told him the whole thing."

The girl turned to Inspector Rice. "That is impossible," she said in a hard voice. "He cannot have told you everything, for he doesn't know everything. But if he has told all about Dudden and myself, as I suppose he has—and anyhow you would have to know it—then I have something more to say."

The inspector had turned to her with a look of gratified expectation that he did not try to disguise. But before he could reply to her, Sergeant Hall showed himself at the door, and in response to a nod from the inspector walked with him to the window, where again they conferred in undertones.

"His prints are on the knife?" Rice asked, with a motion of his head towards Robert.

"Plain as can be. But," added the sergeant, "it's a queer thing about the others—the bloody ones, that is. You see, they are all on the top of his wherever they come together. It's evident what that means."

"Yes, of course it is," the inspector answered tartly. "I wasn't born yesterday. But do you know whose they are—the second lot?"

Sergeant Hall smiled in appreciation of the effect that he was now to make. "They're the old woman's," he whispered.

"What?" Rice was really startled. "Great Scott! Then can she have been telling the truth after all?"

"I don't know what she's been telling you," his subordinate replied with relish. "I didn't know you had been putting her through it. But they're Mrs. Hulk's fingerprints all right."

Chapter VI

MR. PARSONS ON THE CASE

by Father Ronald Knox

There is kindness even in the most warped natures, and Mr. Parsons, the "mottled man from next door," willingly asked Wilfred Hope to stay the night with him and be near the scene of action, after that harassing evening when he had seen his future brother-in-law, Robert Ellis, detained by the police for further enquiry; while his fiancée Amy and her parents continued to enjoy the shelter of their own roof only under supervision, and very obvious supervision, from the police. Mr. Parsons even brought up some whisky after dinner for Wilfred's sake and sat there watching him with evident kindness over the rim of his barley water.

"I feel so hopeless," Wilfred was saying. "I know, from themselves, all the movements of the Ellises during yesterday evening and I know that none of them dealt Dudden his *coup de grâce*. That

remains a mystery, and who knows what case the police are hatching up, to cover their own ignorance?"

Mr. Parsons' behavior was peculiar. He went to the dining room sideboard and opened, most unexpectedly, a sliding panel in the wall. "I am proud of this," he said. "Put it in myself. Goes into the pantry, you see. The little window where the ham comes peeping in at morn. And I sometimes call it my confessional; you see, I can go into the pantry and listen to every word that is being said in here. I did that this afternoon, you know, when Inspector Rice borrowed this room and had his interview with the real criminal."

"The real criminal? Then you know . . . ? Oh, for God's sake tell me the name; don't dance around like that."

"Come, come, Mr. Hope; let us have confidences on both sides. You know the story from the other side, the Ellises' side. Tell me that first, and I promise you you shall have my share."

"Very well, you shall have it. But you shall have it in a nutshell form if you won't tell me your side first. There were three plots on foot that night; they all enter into the story, though none was murderous. Dudden had insisted that Amy should have an interview with me and break off our engagement; he himself was to be listening behind the screen. When he left the dinner table, he slammed the front door and crept in there to hide himself behind the screen, ready for the interview. Mrs. Ellis, thinking that he really meant to leave the house, had arranged to have him shadowed by that man Hulk, knocked out with a life-preserver, and robbed of certain documents."

"What documents?" put in Mr. Parsons sharply.

"A check, if you must know, forged in Dudden's name by Robert, and Robert's signed confession that he had forged it. This, of course, never came off. Hulk came round to get his final directions and his pay, but as Dudden never left the house, he waited for him in vain."

"And the third plot?"

"That was Amy's. I had suspected something of the sort, from the way she used to ask me, this last week or so, about the effects of narcotics. I am a medical student, you see. Well, she got hold of some morphine and managed to put it into the beer Dudden drank at supper. Her idea was that he would go off under its influence while he waited behind the screen and she would get the documents out of his pocket. Actually, as we now know, they were in Dudden's office."

Mr. Parsons suddenly went off into a little explosion of laughter.

"I say," he cried, "that's good. It wasn't Dudden's check at all; it was a dud 'un. See what I mean?"

"For the Lord's sake, shut up and let me get on. When he left the table, Robert followed him on an impulse; he wanted to make one last appeal, I suppose. As he passed through the hall, he saw my case of knives and took one out, for self-defense, he says. Dudden, when he found him in the drawing room, was already feeling dazed with the drug and seemed to take no notice of him. This infuriated him, and he struck at his neck with the knife. Dudden fell like a log; there was not much blood at the time, but Robert, knowing nothing about the morphine, thought he had done his man in. He found blood on his hand and cuffs and rushed upstairs to wash. He did not reckon on Mrs. Hulk's going to pull the curtains, which she did a few minutes later—about twenty-five past nine—and found a corpse, so she says, behind the screen."

"Didn't Robert expect that the rest of the family would go into the drawing room?"

"Why, no. Amy had arranged that they should go on sitting in the dining room till after I came; she said she wanted particularly to see me alone in the drawing room. They were accustomed to that, though Mr. Ellis didn't like it because his patience table is in the drawing room. No, it was Mrs. Hulk who found the body, and she ran upstairs to see what Robert was doing. They came down together and looked for the papers, which weren't there. Then Mrs. Hulk took the knife and went off to the kitchen; at that moment, they heard the rest of the family leaving the dining room after all and coming into the drawing room. Robert hadn't the courage to confess what he had done. He sat down and listened to the reading, hoping that nothing would be found before they all went to bed; he thought he would bury the body in the garden, poor fool, later on."

"And that was how you found them? Robert knowing that Dudden lay dead behind the screen; Miss Amy thinking that Dudden lay drugged behind the screen; Mrs. Ellis hoping that Dudden lay clubbed on the road; altogether one of these pleasant evenings round the fireside. But something, you say, is left unexplained?"

"Everything is left unexplained. Robert is quite certain he only struck one blow, and a light one. But there was a second blow, a deep stab, which caused death. I can't believe Mrs. Hulk did it; she swears she thought the man was dead when she found him. In those five minutes, or thereabouts, say between twenty past and twenty-five past, somebody must have come in and dealt the second

blow. What are we to make of that? And how is Robert's counsel to explain that? You say you know who is the real criminal; I've told you everything; now it's your turn."

"Singular, very singular. And yet it all seems to fit. As I say, I was taking the liberty of listening behind the panel at about five this afternoon. And I heard that little dressmaker—Pettigrew, isn't it, her name?—confessing to Inspector Rice that she found the corpse in the drawing room just after twenty past and stuck the knife in again hard to make sure that it was a corpse."

"The—dressmaker, did you say? But why on earth should she? How did she come there? She must be mad."

"I don't think so. You see, Rice had been investigating Dudden's past life and found that he had a wife living, whom he had deserted; her maiden name was Pettigrew. Then, looking through Mrs. Ellis's bills, he found that Miss Pettigrew had supplied her with goods ridiculously below cost price; she was making an excuse, evidently, to have the entree into the house where her faithless husband lived. She was waiting in the hall for Dudden to pass through; she had just learned that he wanted to marry Miss Amy. She went in to have it out with him; found him, apparently, a corpse, and made a safe job of it. She wore gloves; she was very genteel. Then she opened the front door and slipped out. That was just before twenty-five past while I was out posting my letters; otherwise I should have seen her."

"Then . . . then, it's all right? The murder charge will be brought against her, poor little thing? And Robert, at the worst, can only be convicted of a murderous attack. Thank God for that, anyhow!"

"Yes," said Mr. Parsons, "I think that is what will happen. Of course, if I explained my theory to the police, it might make them think twice, but I'm not one to make trouble."

"Your theory? What do you mean?"

"Don't you see that both the confessions are untrue? That it was really Miss Pettigrew who went in first and inflicted a slight cut on Dudden's neck; Robert who went in afterwards and polished him off?"

"But this is monstrous! Why on earth should they both lie like that?"

"Robert knows that the second blow was the fatal one; therefore he pretends that he dealt the first. Miss Pettigrew thinks that the first blow was fatal; therefore she pretends that she dealt the second. If she was in the hall, why did she not admit that she had seen

Robert passing through? Answer, she was no longer in the hall when Robert went through; she had escaped after inflicting a light wound on her unworthy husband. I fancy that Robert and Mrs. Hulk have put up a false story about the time, and that the rest of the family have been persuaded into backing them up. I fancy Robert's second thrust was given a few minutes before your arrival, and that explains why the bleeding went on so long. You yourself were surprised, you told me, at the way the corpse bled."

"I know, but I've been looking it up since. Taylor says if you don't manage to sever any of the important vessels, only branches of them, you can bleed to death as slowly as you like. He gives a case of seven hours. So there's nothing in that, really."

"Well, let us pass that. I still say that if Miss Pettigrew was in the hall when Robert came through, they would have seen one another, and it would have come out in the evidence. There was no reason why either should screen the other. Miss Pettigrew was let into the hall at ten minutes past nine, Mrs. Hulk says. When Robert left the dining room, she was no longer there. Therefore, I say, she had already stabbed Dudden, lightly, as it proved, and gone away. Robert must have inflicted the second blow, not earlier than nine twenty-five."

"You don't convince me. Robert might have deceived the inspector; I do not think he could have deceived his own family. And it was from Mrs. Ellis I had the whole story."

"Why, yes; I suppose that satisfies you. But, you see, I have been asking myself this long time past whether the whole of the family was not 'in it' to some extent. Did Robert really leave them in the dark? Or did they know, even when you came into the room, what was behind the screen?"

"Excuse me," said Wilfred rather stiffly. "You forget that I know these people, and trust them absolutely."

"Of course, of course." Mr. Parsons waved a deprecating hand. "But I was thinking what a British jury would make of it. Come, man, you yourself noticed, when you came into the room, a *general* atmosphere of nervousness. Doesn't it look as if they were all in the secret already? And had sat down to their reading at the last moment, *to make you think* they were at their ease?"

"I did think of that—I took the book Mrs. Ellis was reading and read it out to myself from the beginning of the chapter to the point they had reached when I came in; it took exactly twenty-five minutes. Was that coincidence?"

"But the patience. Mr. Ellis was not really playing, you told me so yourself. He was only turning over the cards."

"Which shows that he was *not* nervous. A nervous man *plays* the game, to calm his nerves. Mr. Ellis was giving a signal to his wife. When he showed a particular card, she was to stop reading, and they would leave Amy and me alone together. It was the three of clubs: *two's company*, you see, *three's none*—that was the idea."

"Well, let us absolve the family. But I still have the feeling—excuse me—that Master Robert has *not* made a clean breast of it to anyone. I am sure it was he who dealt the fatal stab."

"Yes, Mr. Parsons, but there is one thing you have overlooked. You saw the bathroom light go on when Robert rushed upstairs to wash his hands. It was after that you went out to post your letter. And it was while you were posting the letter, and could not see the front door, that Miss Pettigrew escaped."

"You have me there. Yes, you have me. By the way, what part did Mrs. Hulk play in all this?"

"She found the knife by the corpse and took it away wrapped in a piece of paper. That was the paper on which, afterwards, she sliced the beef, to hide the bloodstains. How she got rid of the knife I never discovered."

"That was when I came in. When the police arrived, she came round to my window, which was open, crying *Oh Gawd! Murder!* I rushed out to the front door, and while I did so, she slipped the knife into *my* aspidistra. She is a clever woman."

"She is. It was she who put ink on Robert's clean shirt, all over the cuffs, for fear I might have seen the bloodstains on the one he was wearing. By the way, Mr. Parsons, at one moment I suspected *you*."

"Because of the aspidistra? I think I could make good my alibi. I saw the bathroom light go up; how, if I was not at my study window? I went out to post a letter, but I was back in my room a few minutes later and saw Hulk go. Had I time, during those twelve minutes, to force my way into the house? It was a wet and windy night, remember, and the window, naturally, was shut."

So the two amateurs pieced it out together. They could not know everything. They could not know that Miss Pettigrew, instead of waiting in the hall all the time, went into the pantry to sneak biscuits and so never saw Robert pass. That only came out at the inquest and was used by the court, most unscrupulously, as evidence that Miss Pettigrew was, at the moment of the murder, insane. □

BOOKED & PRINTED

by Mary Cannon



Cosy up on a comfy faded sofa with your old hound dog at your feet and a hot cup of tea close at hand. It's time to wind down with the laconic Carl Wilcox, ex-con, itinerant signpainter, ladies' man, and amateur sleuth in **The Ditched Blonde** (Walker, \$19.95). When Wilcox drives into Greenhill, South Dakota (population 3,182), in his Model T, he gets more than a commission to paint a few signs for the local shopkeepers. Carl has also proved surprisingly handy at crimesolving, which has come to the attention of both the local sheriff and Greenhill's mayor. They hire him to investigate the three year old, unsolved murder of a popular local high school girl. Harold Adams' spare prose and keen ear for dialogue and period detail are hypnotic. You can hear the putter of an old car engine, smell the oak flooring in the shops, and taste those thick soda fountain malts. Yet there's nothing sappy or sentimental in Adams' depiction of his small-town characters. The secrets they hide are as dark, the violence they mask is as ugly, and the passions that guide them can become as lethal as any that drive the suspense in a modern mean-streets crime novel.

Meet Stephanie Plum in **One for the Money** by Janet Evanovich (Harper, \$5.99). She's been laid off for months, she's out of money, furniture, and food, and now some jerk she went to school with is chasing her around Trenton with the sole purpose of repossessing her beloved Miata convertible. But things can get worse—and do. Her “date with a pot roast” at her parents' house leads to a confession of her impecunious state and a bevy of pushy suggestions from her long-suffering parents and her eccentric grandmother. The bottom line is that cousin Vinnie, the bail bondsman, is

looking for a file clerk. But why file, Stephanie asks herself, when she can make big bucks working for Vinnie as a bounty hunter? And as an extra bonus (as if the ten thousand dollar fee weren't enough!), Stephanie's first case is to bring in former vice cop Joe Morelli. This poor guy has long lived in infamy as Stephanie's very first one-night stand, an incident dating (although they didn't—and therein lies the source of her ill will) back to high school. So all Stephanie needs now is a car. And maybe a good disguise or two. Oh, and maybe someone to teach her how to shoot a gun? The banter between Stephanie and Morelli is reminiscent of vintage screwball comedies, and the plot almost keeps up with Stephanie's mouth. A wildly hilarious romp.

British author Peter Lovesey continues his award-winning series featuring Peter Diamond, the overweight and underappreciated former C.I.D. man from Avon and Somerset, in **The Summons** (Mysterious Press, \$21.95). Since he quit his C.I.D. job in a pique, he and his devoted wife have been struggling to make ends meet in a London flat. He misses his old job; he was good at it. Diamond's final words to his super, however, guarantee that there's no turning back. Then John Mountjoy breaks out of prison, and Diamond's luck may have changed. Mountjoy, a brilliant misogynist, was sentenced to life imprisonment for murdering a beautiful woman reporter. Now he's kidnapped the daughter of Diamond's former boss and is demanding to talk to the detective who made the case against him: Peter Diamond. No one is more surprised than the former detective when he hears what Mountjoy wants: clear Mountjoy of the murder, of which he was innocent. Lovesey's character is testy, occasionally arrogant, brutally honest, and irresistible to watch in action.

Another summer's gone, and you didn't get to Venice. Again. Don't despair. Pick up **Black Bridge** by Edward Sklepowich, his fourth Urbino Macintyre mystery, and enjoy the city off-season (Scribner, \$21). Urbino is an expatriate American who makes his living as a biographer of great Italians, but his life centers around small-town Venice and its year-round community. The golden city of Venice is a major character in this series. It is lovingly and graphically detailed, and a perfect backdrop for the urbane and solitary Macintyre. Also strong in the supporting cast is Urbino's special friend and patron Barbara, the Contessa da Capo-Zendrini; a wealthy older widow with admirable panache, a big heart, and a clever head. The arrival of an old friend of Barbara's late husband,

however, a dashing actor nicknamed Bobo, begins to turn Barbara's fine head. This threatens to upend Urbino's comfortable world. But Bobo is receiving threatening notes, and since Urbino has a facility for solving puzzles (including several crimes), naturally Barbara turns to him: Soon there's a double murder, and then another sudden death. As Urbino struggles with strong feelings of jealousy, he must also look into the hearts of the small band of suspects who arrived in Bobo's wake for someone who has, finally, killed for love.

Historical mystery fans will adore **The Prince Lost to Time** (St. Martin's, \$21.95) by Ann Dukthas. This is only one of a number of fascinating adventures in the long life of a time-traveling scholar named Nicholas Segalla, as related to the author. And what a tale Segalla can tell, filled with dangerous court intrigue and closely guarded secrets, betrayals and bloodshed, all set in France in the tumultuous period of its revolution. Marie Antoinette and her poor king play their roles alongside a huge cast of other historical figures as Segalla searches for the truth about the disappearance of France's boy prince, Marie and Louis's son and heir to the throne. Dukthas has created a fascinating character in the ruthless, brilliant, and honorable Segalla, a man who doesn't age, but instead acquires new skills, information, and wisdom as he moves around the courts of Europe. Potential chapters in Segalla's life, then, are limitless. Readers will undoubtedly yearn to read more of them, so we must all hope that this mysterious figure chooses to approach the author again soon.

Robert Irvine's private eye may be named after a Mormon saint, but Moroni Traveler is definitely not a practicing Mormon. In **Pillar of Fire** (St. Martin's, \$21.95), however, Moroni finds himself engaged by one of the most powerful figures in the Church of Latter-day Saints in Salt Lake City. The man's daughter and grandson have fled to the desert to join a cult that believes it has found a new leader and authentic healer. The healer, however, protests that his gift was discovered accidentally: he was merely trying to seek spiritual peace in seclusion. Moroni is joined in the desert by his father, who has promised an old friend that he will try to find the man's retarded son, a runaway from a nursing home. There are powerful forces at work here, both church and state, in addition to the merciless power of Mother Nature in the desert. A fast-paced private eye novel with some action and characters both believable and sympathetic.

THE STORY THAT WON



The October Mysterious Photo-Holden O'Hearn of Guilden-
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FALSE ARREST by E. Holden O'Hearn

They walked through the park two by two,
some were one by one.

Twenty-three penguins, formally dressed,
out for a walk in the sun.

Passing drivers were taken aback
at the boldness of their mien.

"Disgraceful," they cried, "that such a sight
should mar a civilized scene!"

So the coppers were called to put an end
to this unorthodox parade,

And the dog warden showed with his collection van
to see if the cops needed aid.

They got one call, and to everyone's gall,
a man showed up with a cape.

His tight-skin tights and head-masked face
did make the coppers gape.

But he had the cash to bail them out,
which he did with effortless ease.

"My friends are extras in my film.

What are the charges, please?

You held our film up half a day;
this delay will cost us much!"

As he left with his friends, he gave them a smile—

"Our lawyers will be in touch!"

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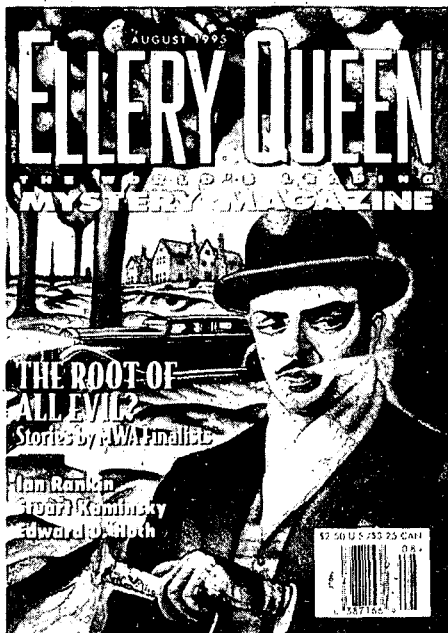
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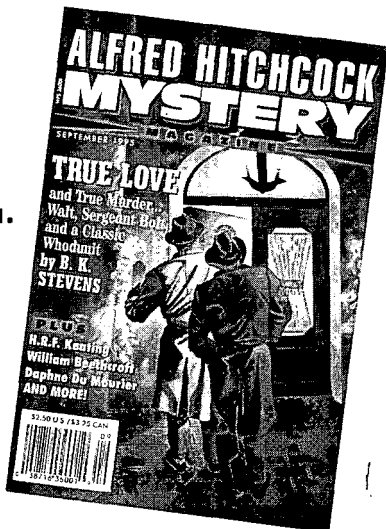
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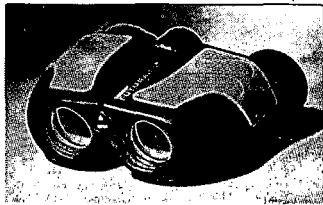
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